Fyodor

DOSTOEVSKY

HUMILIATED AND INSULTED

Humiliated and Insulted

"The real nineteenth-century prophet was
Dostoevsky, not Karl Marx."
Albert Camus

"Dostoevsky gives me more than any scientist, more than Gauss!"
Albert Einstein

"The only psychologist from whom I have anything to learn."
Friedrich Nietzsche

"Goethe once had to delay the completion of one of his novels till experience had furnished him with new situations, but almost before he had arrived at manhood Dostoevsky knew life in its most real forms; poverty and suffering, pain and misery, prison, exile and love were soon familiar to him, and by the lips of Vanya he had told his own story. This note of personal feeling, this harsh reality of actual experience, undoubtedly gives *Humiliated and Insulted* something of its strange fervour and terrible passion, yet it has not made it egotistic; we see things from every point of view, and we feel not that action has been trammelled by fact, but that fact itself has become ideal and imaginative."
Oscar Wilde

"The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture. Out of Shakespeare there is no more exciting reading."
Virginia Woolf

Humiliated and Insulted

From the Notes
of an Unsuccessful Author

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated by Ignat Avsey

ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS LTD
Thornton House
Thornton Road
Wimbledon Village
London SW19 4NG
United Kingdom
www.almaclassics.com

Humiliated and Insulted first published in Russian as *Униженные и оскорблённые* in 1861
First published by Alma Classics in 2008. Reprinted 2011
A new edition first published by Alma Classics in 2012. Reprinted 2014
This new edition first published by Alma Classics in 2018
Reprinted with a new cover design in 2020
English Translation © Ignat Avsey, 2008
Extra material © Ignat Avsey, 2008

Cover: nathanburtondesign.com

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84749-780-2

All the pictures in this volume are reprinted with permission or presumed to be in the public domain. Every effort has been made to ascertain and acknowledge their copyright status, but should there have been any unwitting oversight on our part, we would be happy to rectify the error in subsequent printings.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

Contents

Humiliated and Insulted 1
Note on the Text 398
Notes 399

Extra Material
Fyodor Dostoevsky's Life 403
Fyodor Dostoevsky's Works 414
Select Bibliography 424

Humiliated and Insulted

Principal Characters

Alexandra Semyonovna: Masloboyev's mistress
Alexander Petrovich: Vanya's publisher
Alyosha, Alexei, Alexei Petrovich: Prince Valkovsky's son
Anna Andreyevna: Ikhmenev's wife
Arkhipov: a debauchee and paedophile
Bubnova, Anna Trifonovna: a brothel keeper and landlady
Count Nainsky: Prince Valkovsky's relative, a St Petersburg grandee
Countess Zinaida Fyodorovna: Prince Valkovsky's mistress
Ikhmenev, Nikolai Sergeich: a landowner, owner of Ikhmenevka
Katya, Katerina Fyodorovna Filimonova: the Countess's step-daughter
Masloboyev, Filip Filipych: Vanya's old school friend and sleuth
Matryona: Ikhmenevs' maidservant
Mavra: Natasha's maidservant
Natasha, Natalya Nikolayevna: Ikhmenevs' daughter
Nelly, Yelena, Lenochka: Smith's granddaughter
Prince Valkovsky, Pyotr Alexandrovich: owner of Vasilevskoye
Sizobryukhov, Stepan Terentych: Arkhipov's companion
Jeremiah Smith: an impoverished industrialist
Vanya, Ivan Petrovich: the narrator, a young author

Part One

1

LAST YEAR, ON THE EVENING of 22nd March, I had a most unusual experience. All day I'd been tramping the city in search of lodgings. The place I was then living in was very damp, and I was already starting to develop a nasty cough. I'd been meaning to move the previous autumn, but ended up putting it off till spring. I couldn't find anything suitable. First, I wanted self-contained accommodation, not a room in someone else's house – and secondly, even if it were only a single room, it would definitely have to be a large one and, it goes without saying, as cheap as possible. I have noticed that in a cramped space one's thoughts too tend to be cramped. Also, while planning my novels, I like to pace up and down the room. Incidentally, I've always found mulling over my compositions and imagining how they are likely to turn out more enjoyable than actually committing them to paper, and not just out of laziness. I wonder why that is!

I had been feeling unwell since morning, and by evening I was distinctly worse, with a fever coming on. Besides, I had been on my feet all day and was tired. Evening came, and just before dusk I happened to be walking along Voznesensky Prospect. I love the sun, especially the setting March sun in St Petersburg on a clear frosty evening. The whole street is suddenly bathed in brilliant light. All the houses glow. For a time, the grey, yellow and dull-green façades lose their drabness; there's a sense of euphoria, of awakening, as though someone had poked you in the ribs. A new vista, new ideas… marvellous what a single ray of sunshine can do to a man's soul!

But the sun's rays vanished. The frost was getting sharper and beginning to numb my nose. Dusk was falling. Up and down the street the gas lamps were being lit in the shop windows. As I drew level with Müller's coffee house I came to a dead halt and gazed across the street as though expecting something out of the ordinary to occur, and at that very instant I caught sight of the old man and his dog on the opposite side. I recall very well that my heart sank with some awful presentiment – but of what, for the life of me I couldn't fathom.

I'm not a mystic; I'm no believer in premonitions or fortune-telling. However, possibly like everyone else, I have experienced incidents in my life that were somewhat inexplicable. Take this old man for instance. Why did I, seeing him on that occasion, immediately feel that something rather unusual would happen to me that night? Mind you, I was ill, and feverish impressions are nearly always deceptive.

The stooped old man, with his slow, faltering gait, moved his almost rigid legs like stilts, tapping the paving stones lightly with his stick as he approached the coffee house. In all my life, I've never met such a strange and incongruous figure. Even before this particular occasion, when we happened to come across each other at Müller's, he had never failed to give me a feeling of unease. His tall frame, his crooked back, his cadaverous octogenarian face, his shabby old coat coming apart at the seams, his crumpled twenty-year-old stovepipe hat barely covering his bald head – on the back of which a single tuft of, well, not even grey but yellowish-white hair still survived – his movements which seemed to be performed mechanically, as if by clockwork – all this could not fail to astonish anyone who met him for the first time. It was really strange to see such a decrepit figure on his own, without anyone to help him, especially since he had the look of a mental patient who had fled from his carers. I also couldn't get over how extraordinarily thin he was. There was hardly any flesh on him – his skin appeared to be stretched tight over his bones. His large rheumy eyes circled by dark blue rings were always staring fixedly ahead, never deviating and totally unseeing – of that I'm certain – even if he was looking at you, he went on walking straight at you as if you weren't there. I had observed this several times. It was only quite recently that he had begun to frequent Müller's, appearing from goodness knows where, and always accompanied by his

dog. Nobody in the coffee house dared to engage him in conversation, nor did he himself ever speak to anyone.

"Why on earth does he keep going to Müller's? What's the attraction?" I wondered as I stood on the opposite side of the street staring at him compulsively. A kind of despondency – the effect of illness and fatigue – was welling up inside me. "What's he thinking about?" I kept asking myself. "What's on his mind – that is, if he's got anything at all on his mind?" His face was so lifeless that it expressed absolutely nothing. And where did he get that wretched dog which stuck to him like a limpet and was so much like him?

The miserable animal must have been about eighty itself; yes, that surely was the case. To begin with, it looked old like no other dog in the world – moreover, why was it that as soon as I set eyes on it, I immediately sensed that it was like no other dog; that it was an extraordinary dog; that there must be something fantastical, something enchanted about it; that it was some kind of a Mephistopheles* in canine form and that its fate was in some inexplicable manner linked to its master's? Looking at it, you would have immediately concluded that it must have been about twenty years since it had last had anything to eat. It was as emaciated as a skeleton or, to go no further, as its master. It had lost its fur almost everywhere – including its tail, which dangled like a stick, always drawn tightly between its legs; its head, with ears drooping, hung despondently down. I had never in my life seen a more repugnant beast. When the two of them were walking along the street – master in front, and dog behind – its nose would be touching the hem of his coat as though glued to it. Both their gait and their general appearance seemed almost to be saying, "How old, O God, how old we both are!"

I seem to remember thinking that the old man and his dog had somehow stepped out of a Gavarni illustration to a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann,* wandering the world like perambulating publishers' advertisements. I crossed the street and followed the old man into the coffee house.

There the old man always behaved rather oddly, and lately the proprietor had begun to screw up his face disapprovingly from behind the counter every time the unwelcome customer entered his premises.

For a start, the strange visitor never ordered anything. He would always go straight to the corner by the stove and sit down. If that place was taken, he would stand for a time in dumb consternation in front of the person sitting there, after which he would move off, seeming deeply puzzled, to another corner by the window. There he would pick a chair, lower himself slowly onto it, take off his hat, place it and his stick on the floor nearby, and then, leaning back, sit almost motionless for the next three or four hours. He had never been known to take up a newspaper, say a single word or even utter a sound. He would just sit there, staring straight ahead, but with such lifeless, expressionless eyes that one might have confidently wagered he neither saw nor heard anything around him. The dog, after turning around once or twice on the spot, would settle disconsolately at his feet, stick its muzzle between his boots, breathe deeply and stretch out to its full length, oblivious of all the world. These two might have been lying stone dead somewhere all day, and come to life at dusk merely to visit Müller's coffee house, to act out some mysterious ritual. After sitting for his customary three or four hours, the old man would suddenly rise, pick up his hat and make for home – wherever that might be. The dog too would get up and, as always, head hung low and tail between its legs, automatically follow him at a slow pace. In the end the regulars began to avoid the old man as much as possible; they wouldn't even sit near him, as though he produced a feeling of revulsion in them. He himself remained completely unaware of it all.

The regulars were predominantly German. They gathered there from the whole of Voznesensky Prospect; all of them had their own businesses – locksmiths, bakers, painters, milliners, saddlers – every one a patrician in the German sense of the word;* generally speaking, respectability was the thing at Müller's. Not infrequently the proprietor himself would come over to his acquaintances, join them at their table, and a good quantity of punch would be consumed. His dogs and children would sometimes join them too, and the customers would pat them, both dogs and children. They all knew one another, and there was an atmosphere of mutual respect. And when the customers settled down to read German newspapers, the strains of 'Ach, du lieber Augustin!'* could be heard from the adjoining room, played on a tinkly

upright piano by the proprietor's eldest daughter, a curly fair-haired wisp of a German girl who bore a close resemblance to a white mouse. The waltz was a great favourite. I was in the habit of going to Müller's at the beginning of each month to read the Russian magazines that were available there.

When I entered the coffee house that March evening, I saw that the old man was already seated at the window, with the dog as usual stretched out at his feet. I took a seat in the corner, wondering to myself, "Why on earth did I come here? There was absolutely no need. I'm ill and ought to be off home to have a glass of tea and go to bed! Did I really come here just to stare at this old man?" I was suddenly irritated. "Why should I care about him?" I thought, recalling the strange feeling of disgust that I'd felt towards him while we were still outside. "And why should I bother about all these tedious Germans? Why this feeling of unreality? Why this groundless, pointless anxiety I've lately been aware of within myself and which has been plaguing me and – a point that had already been made by a deeply perceptive critic in a scathing review of my latest novel – preventing me from seeing things in their true light?" But even as I was fretfully turning all this over in my mind, I made no attempt to move; meanwhile my fever was rising so violently that in the end I was simply unwilling to leave the warmth of the room. I picked up a Frankfurt newspaper, read a couple of lines, and dozed off. The presence of the Germans did not bother me. They went on reading and smoking, and only occasionally, about every half-hour, would exchange with one another, in a hushed, disjointed manner, some snippet of Frankfurt news or some aphorism or joke by the famous wit Saphir* – after which they would again immerse their German selves in their reading, with a redoubled sense of national propriety.

I had been dozing for about half an hour and woke up shivering with cold. I really had to be getting home. But at that moment a dumb scene took place in the room, riveting my attention once more. I have already mentioned that as soon as the old man settled in his chair he would immediately fix his gaze on some object and hold it there the whole evening. Sometimes he would stare at me too in this mindlessly persistent, totally undiscerning manner, which gave me a most

unpleasant sensation bordering on the unbearable, and I would hurriedly change my seat. This time the old man's victim was a diminutive, stocky and very smartly dressed German with an upturned stiffly starched collar and an extraordinarily florid complexion. He was a trader who had just arrived from Riga, rejoicing in the name of Adam Ivanych Schulz – as I discovered later, a close friend of Müller's, but who did not yet know the old man or many of the clientele. Happily engrossed in the pages of *The Illustrated Village Barber* and sipping his punch, he suddenly looked up and met the old man's stare. This nonplussed him. Adam Ivanych was very touchy and uncompromising, as all *self-respecting* Germans are. It struck him as peculiarly offensive to be subjected to such close and unceremonious scrutiny. But, suppressing his indignation, he averted his eyes from the insistent gaze, mumbled something under his breath, and lapsed into silent refuge behind his paper. However, he was unable to resist peering suspiciously round the paper a couple of minutes later, only to meet the same steadfast gaze, the same absurd scrutiny. Adam Ivanych said nothing this time either. But when the whole thing was repeated a third time, he took umbrage and, in order to uphold the name of the fair city of Riga – of which he probably considered himself to be the rightful representative – and defend his own dignity, he braced himself for battle before this worthy gathering. He threw down his paper in annoyance and rapped the table sharply with the cane to which it was attached. Then, bursting with self-importance and crimson-faced – as much from the punch as from his sense of outrage – he fixed his small bloodshot eyes upon this disturbing old man. It seemed the two were trying to outstare each other, to see which one would be the first to lose his nerve and look away. The rap of the cane and the oddity of Adam Ivanych's bearing attracted the attention of the other customers, who immediately stopped whatever they were doing and looked expectantly and in respectful silence at the two adversaries. The scene was becoming very comical. But the intensity of the flushed Adam Ivanych's provocative gaze was totally wasted. The old man, oblivious of everything around him, continued to look straight at the furious Herr Schulz, and seemed quite unaware that he had become the centre of general attention; the

man before him might as well have been on the moon. Adam Ivanych's patience finally snapped, and he gave vent to his emotions.

"Why you look at me with so much attention?" he shouted menacingly, in his shrill, penetrating German.

But his adversary remained quite silent, as though he had not understood or even heard the question. Adam Ivanych decided to switch to Russian.

"I have you asked, why you look upon me with so much attention?" he yelled with redoubled rage. "I am at Court known and you are not at Court known!" he added, jumping to his feet.

But the old man didn't turn a hair. A murmur of indignation rose from the ranks of the Germans. Attracted by the commotion, Müller himself appeared. Having ascertained what the trouble was, and thinking the old man was deaf, he put his mouth close to his ear.

"Herr Schulz have asked you with consideration not to look so upon him," he said as loudly as possible, looking hard at the inscrutable visitor.

The old man glanced listlessly at Müller, and his features, which had remained immobile till then, suddenly betrayed signs of some inner alarm, some acute anxiety. He became agitated, bent down with a croak to pick up his hat, snatched it up hurriedly together with his stick, and rising from the chair with a pathetic smile – the pathetic smile of a beggar who is being evicted from the spot he has occupied in error – prepared to leave the room. The old man's humble readiness to oblige was somehow so pitiful, so distressing, that the whole company, headed by Adam Ivanych, immediately underwent a collective change of heart. It was clear that the old man was not only not out to offend anyone, but was himself only too aware that he could be thrown out of any establishment, being a beggar.

Müller was a kind and compassionate man.

"No, no," he said, patting him consolingly on the back, "do not get up! *Aber*[2] Herr Schulz asked very much for you not to look upon him with so much attention. He is at Court known."

But the poor wretch still failed to understand. He began to fuss even more, bent down to pick up his handkerchief, an old blue rag full of holes which had fallen out of his hat, and began to speak to his dog,

which was lying motionless on the floor, its muzzle between its paws, apparently fast asleep.

"Azorka, Azorka!" he mumbled in his tremulous elderly voice, "Azorka!"

Azorka did not move.

"Azorka, Azorka!" the old man repeated despondently, prodding the dog with his stick. The animal did not stir.

The stick fell from the old man's grasp. He bent over, knelt down and took Azorka's head in his hands, lifting it slightly. Poor Azorka! The dog was dead. It had died without a sound at its master's feet, perhaps of old age, perhaps of hunger. The old man gazed down at it for a minute or so as though thunderstruck, unable to comprehend that Azorka was dead; then bending down over his former servant and friend, he pressed his sallow face up against the dead creature's muzzle. There was a minute's silence. We were all moved. After a time the poor devil rose to his feet. He was very pale, and trembling all over as if he were having an attack of the shakes.

"We can make a stuffing," the compassionate Müller said, breaking the silence and wishing to give the old man whatever comfort he could. (He meant the animal could be stuffed.) "We can make a good stuffing. Fyodor Karlovich Krüger makes good stuffings. Fyodor Karlovich Krüger is a Master Stuffer." Müller picked up the old man's stick from the floor and passed it to him.

"Yes, I make excellent stuffing," Herr Krüger himself now spoke up modestly, stepping forwards into the limelight. He was a tall, gaunt, kindly-looking man with uneven tufts of ginger hair, wearing a pair of glasses on his aquiline nose.

"Fyodor Karlovich Krüger has big talent to make every kind of excellent stuffing," Müller added, getting more and more excited by the idea.

"Yes, I have big talent to make every kind of excellent stuffing," Herr Krüger again confirmed. "And," he added in an outburst of exuberant generosity, "I will make a stuffing from your dog for nothing."

"No, I will pay everything for you making this stuffing!" Adam Ivanych Schulz cried out, his face getting redder and redder, and also

overcome by the occasion, in the genuine belief that he was the cause of the whole calamity.

The old man obviously understood nothing of all this, and continued to shake in every limb.

"*Moment!* Drink *ein Glas*[*] good brandy!" Müller exclaimed, realizing that the mysterious visitor was about to depart.

The brandy was brought. The old man reached out listlessly for the glass, but his hands were unsteady, and before he had brought it to his lips he had spilt a good half of it. Without drinking a drop, he put it back on the tray. Then, smiling awkwardly and quite inappropriately, he left the coffee house with hurried uneven steps, leaving Azorka behind. Everyone was dumbfounded; then there were one or two exclamations.

"*Schwernot! Was für eine Geschichte!*"[*] the Germans said, looking at one another in astonishment.

I dashed out after the old man. A few yards to the right of the coffee house was a dark narrow side street with huge houses on each side. Something told me the old man had turned down that street. The second house on the right was still under construction and was covered in scaffolding. An enclosing fence jutted out almost into the middle of the street, and wooden planks had been laid down alongside it for the convenience of pedestrians. I found the old man in a dark corner between the house and the fence. He was sitting on a step which led to the wooden walkway, head in hands, elbows resting on his knees. I sat down next to him.

"Listen," I said, hardly knowing how to begin, "don't be upset about Azorka. Come now, let me take you home. Don't worry. I'll get a cab. Where do you live?"

The old man made no reply. I was rather at a loss to know what to do. There were no passers-by. Suddenly he started tugging at my arm.

"Air!" he croaked in a barely audible voice. "Air!"

"Let me take you home!" I exclaimed, getting up and trying to raise him to his feet. "You can have some tea and go to bed… Just let me get a cab – we'll be there in no time. I'll call a doctor… There's one I know…"

I can't remember what else I said to him. He made as if to stand up, but after a slight effort collapsed again on the ground and once more started mumbling something in the same croaky, breathless voice. I bent down closer to listen.

"Vasìlevsky,"* the old man wheezed, "Sixth… Sixth Lane…"

He fell silent.

"You live on Vasìlevsky Island? But you were going the wrong way. It's to the left from here, not the right. I'll take you."

The old man did not move. I reached for his hand; it was limp and lifeless. I looked into his face, then touched it. He was dead. It seemed like a bad dream.

This whole episode disturbed me greatly – though by the end of it my fever had been shaken off. I discovered where the old man had lived. It wasn't on Vasìlevsky Island, however, but just a few yards from where he had died, in a house belonging to a man named Klugen, on the fourth floor right under the eaves, in a self-contained garret consisting of a small hallway and one large room with a very low ceiling and three slits that passed for windows. He had lived in extreme poverty. The furniture consisted of a table, two chairs and an old settee, hard as a rock, with tufts of horsehair sticking out of it – all of it belonging to the landlord. The stove looked as if it hadn't been lit for ages, nor were there any candles about. I'm strongly inclined to think now that the old man had gone to sit at Müller's simply for light and warmth. On the table there was an empty earthenware jug and a stale crust of bread. As for money, not a kopeck could be found. There wasn't even a change of underwear – someone donated one of his own shirts to bury him in. It was clear he couldn't have survived like this completely on his own, and someone had probably been visiting him from time to time, albeit infrequently. In the table drawer we came across his passport. It turned out the dead man was of foreign descent, but a Russian subject – one Jeremiah Smith, an engineer, aged seventy-eight. On the table lay two books: an elementary geography course and a New Testament in Russian, full of pencilled annotations in the margins and words underscored with thumbnail marks. I kept these for myself. The tenants and the landlord were questioned, but no one really knew anything about the deceased. Lots of people lodged in the building, almost all

either artisans or German housewives subletting serviced accommodation with full board. The manager of the house, a well-spoken man, couldn't say much about his former tenant either, except that the garret had been let to him at six roubles a month, and that he had lived in it for four months but hadn't paid a kopeck for the last two, with the result that he had been given notice to move out. No one could answer clearly whether anyone came to see him. The house was large – any number of people could pass through such a Noah's Ark of a place, one couldn't keep track of them all. The caretaker, who had worked there for the past five years and might have shed some light on the matter, had gone home on holiday a fortnight earlier, leaving his nephew to stand in for him, a young lad who hadn't yet got to know even half the tenants personally. I'm not sure what the upshot of all these enquiries was, but eventually the old man was buried. In the intervening days I managed amongst other things to make a visit to Sixth Lane on Vasìlevsky Island. It was only when I got there that it struck me as ridiculous that I should have expected to find anything but a row of ordinary houses! But why on earth, I wondered, had the old man mentioned Sixth Lane on Vasìlevsky Island when he was dying? Had he been raving?

I inspected Smith's empty garret and decided I liked it. So I took it. The main thing, the room was large, though its ceiling was so low that at first it seemed I'd always be bumping my head against it. But I soon got used to it. After all, what could one expect for six roubles a month? I liked the fact that it was self-contained; all that remained was to find some daily help because I wouldn't be able to cope by myself. The caretaker promised to look in at least once a day, if only to begin with, to give me a hand in case I needed something urgently. And who knows, I thought to myself – perhaps someone might come to enquire after the old man? However, five days after his death still no one had come.

2

AT THAT TIME, A YEAR AGO, I was still writing short articles for journals, firmly convinced that eventually I'd manage to turn out something substantial and successful. I was also working on a long novel – but as it happens, I've ended up in hospital, and shall probably soon be dead. So if I am going to die soon, I ask myself, why should I bother to write anything at all?

I cannot stop myself constantly recalling the whole of that difficult past year in my life. I want to record everything now, and if I had not devised this occupation for myself I think I'd have died of misery. All these impressions from the past sometimes afflict me painfully, to the point of torment. But once they've been written down, they will take on a calmer, more orderly aspect; they will be less of a delirium and a nightmare to me. At least I believe so. The act of writing itself is such a relief. It will relax and calm me down, revive my writer's instincts, transform my memories and feverish imaginings into something tangible, a task accomplished… Yes, it's a splendid idea. Besides, I could always bequeath my notes to my doctor – who, if the worst came to the worst, could use them in winter to seal the cracks in his windows.

However, for some reason I've started my story in the middle. If I'm going to continue, I should begin again at the beginning. Yes, I'll do that. First, some details about myself.

I wasn't born locally, but far from here, in the district of ***. I've no reason to doubt that my parents were good people, but I was left an orphan at an early age, and brought up in the home of Nikolai Sergeich Ikhmenev, a small landowner who took me in out of compassion. He

had one daughter, Natasha, who was three years younger than me. We grew up together as brother and sister. Oh, my glorious childhood! How futile it is to yearn for its return at the age of twenty-four, and to have nothing else to recall with gratitude and exhilaration on one's deathbed! The sun shone so brightly then, so unlike what we see in the St Petersburg sky of today, and our young hearts beat with such vigour, such joy! We were surrounded by fields and forests then, not these lifeless piles of stone. There was such a wonderful park and orchard on Vasilevskoye Estate, where Nikolai Sergeich was steward! Natasha and I used to go for walks in the orchard, and beyond that there was a vast dank forest, where we once got lost… Unforgettable, golden days! Life was just beginning to assert itself, mysteriously and alluringly – and it was a sweet experience. It seemed then that behind every bush, every tree, some mysterious and unknowable being lurked; the fairy-tale world merged into the real one, and when the evening mist thickened in the deep valleys and its grey, sinuous wisps reached out towards the brambles clinging to the rocky ridges of our great gorge, Natasha and I would stand hand in hand on the edge, peering with bated breath into the depths, expecting at any moment to see someone emerge or call out to us from the mist at the bottom and turn our nursery stories into manifest reality. Once, much later, I reminded Natasha how on one occasion someone had given us a copy of *The Children's Reader*,* and we had immediately dashed into the orchard to our favourite green bench, under the thick canopy of an old maple tree by the pond, and sat down together to read the magical tale of Alphonse and Dalinda. Even now, every time I think of this story my heart misses a beat, and when about a year ago I happened to remind Natasha of the first two lines, "Alphonse, the hero of my tale, was born in Portugal; Don Ramiro, his father…" and so on, I nearly burst into tears. I'm afraid it was very silly of me, which is probably why Natasha smiled so awkwardly at my display of emotion. Of course, she immediately checked herself – I remember that – and to comfort me started to reminisce too. Little by little she entered into the spirit of it. What a glorious evening that was! We went back over everything, from the time I was sent to boarding school in the provincial capital – God, how she wept then! – to our last farewell, when I was taking my leave of Vasilevskoye for ever. I had left

boarding school and was about to set off for St Petersburg to prepare myself for university. I was seventeen at the time, and Natasha had just turned fourteen. I was so clumsy and ungainly, she said, that it was impossible for anyone to keep a straight face when they saw me. When the time came to say goodbye, I took her aside to say something very important to her, but became suddenly tongue-tied. Natasha remembered that I had been very agitated. Needless to say, our conversation floundered. I didn't know what to say, and she probably wouldn't have understood me anyway. I just burst into tears, and left without saying anything more. We met again, much later, in St Petersburg. That was two years ago. Ikhmenev had arrived on some business connected with his lawsuit, and I'd just managed to get myself into print.

3

NIKOLAI SERGEICH IKHMENEV came of a good family which had long since been reduced to poverty. However, after his parents' death he came into possession of a sizeable piece of property with some hundred and fifty souls.* At about the age of twenty he decided to enlist in the Hussars. Everything went well until one disastrous evening in the sixth year of his commission when he gambled away his whole fortune at cards. He didn't sleep that night. The next evening he again turned up at the gaming table and staked his horse – his last possession – on one card. He won, then a second time, then a third, and half an hour later he had recouped one of his hamlets, Ikhmenevka, an estate which at the last census had numbered some fifty souls. He decided to cut his losses, and the very next day resigned his commission. He was irretrievably poorer by a hundred souls. Two months later he was discharged with the rank of lieutenant, and retired to his country seat. Never again in his life did he speak of his gambling loss and, despite his good humour – for which he was well known – he would undoubtedly have had a row with anyone who dared to remind him of it. Once in the country, he settled there to run his estate assiduously, and at the age of thirty-five married Anna Andreyevna Shumilova, a completely dowryless daughter of a titled but impoverished family, who had nevertheless managed to send her to a provincial finishing school for young ladies run by a French émigrée, Mme Mont-Revechet – something that Anna Andreyevna was proud of all her life, though no one could ascertain what she had actually learnt there. Nikolai Sergeich managed his estate with consummate skill. Other landowners in the

neighbourhood learnt from his example. Some years had passed when quite unexpectedly the adjoining estate, Vasilevskoye, which numbered nine hundred souls, saw the arrival of its owner from St Petersburg, one Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich Valkovsky. This caused quite a stir in the neighbourhood. The Prince, though not in the first flush of youth, was still a comparatively young man, of significant rank in government service, well-connected, handsome, wealthy and, last but not least, a widower – something calculated to excite the interest of every lady in the district. Stories were told for a long time of the magnificent reception organized in the provincial capital on his behalf by the Governor, to whom he was distantly related; of how all the ladies in the district "simply swooned at his compliments", and so on and so forth. In short, the newcomer was one of those brilliant representatives of St Petersburg high society who seldom venture into the provinces, but who create a stunning effect when they do. That said, he was anything but gracious, especially towards those who could be of no use to him, or those whom he considered to be even slightly beneath him. He did not deem it necessary to introduce himself to the neighbouring landowners, which at once made him numerous enemies. Consequently, it was a matter of no small surprise when he suddenly decided to pay a visit to Nikolai Sergeich, one of his closest neighbours. At the Ikhmenevs' the Prince caused something of a sensation. He immediately charmed both husband and wife, Anna Andreyevna being especially taken with him. Very soon he was on intimate terms with them, paying a visit every day, inviting them to his home, bursting with witticisms, telling anecdotes, playing their rickety old piano and singing songs. The Ikhmenevs simply couldn't imagine how such an agreeable and charming person could possibly have been described as a haughty, arrogant, callous egoist – the unanimous view of his other neighbours. One must assume that the Prince was genuinely fond of Nikolai Sergeich, who was as straightforward, honest, selfless and honourable a man as one could ever wish to meet. Soon all became clear. The Prince had come to Vasilevskoye in order to dismiss the steward of his estate, an ambitious German agronomist, greying handsomely at the temples, with an aquiline nose and spectacles, but despite these distinguished features a devious character and a shameless thief, who to cap it all had tortured

several peasants to death. Ivan Karlovich was finally caught red-handed in some thievery or other and unmasked; he protested his innocence and spoke volubly of German honesty, but was dismissed all the same and, what's more, with very little ceremony. The Prince was therefore now in need of a steward, and his choice fell on Nikolai Sergeich, an excellent administrator and an upright man – that was of course beyond dispute. It seemed that what the Prince really wanted was for Nikolai Sergeich to volunteer his services, but he didn't do so, and one fine morning the Prince made him an offer of the post, couched in terms of the utmost friendship and civility. At first Ikhmenev turned it down, but the substantial salary proved to be a great temptation for Anna Andreyevna, and the Prince's overwhelming graciousness overcame their last remaining scruples. The Prince had got what he wanted. One must suppose that he was a good judge of men. In the brief period of his acquaintance with Ikhmenev, he had studied his man thoroughly and realized that his heart had to be won, that money alone would achieve little. Above all he needed a person he could rely upon implicitly at all times, and someone who could run Vasilevskoye without his ever having to visit the place himself again. His charm and force of personality were such that Ikhmenev took his friendship at face value. Nikolai Sergeich was one of those kindly, naively romantic people who are one of the glories of Russia – whatever else anyone might say about them – and who, once they come to like someone (God only knows why at times), will surrender themselves heart and soul, occasionally taking their devotion to ridiculous lengths.

Many years passed. The Prince's estate flourished. Communications between landowner and manager were carried on with complete friendliness on both sides, but were limited strictly to business matters. The Prince did not interfere at all in Nikolai Sergeich's decision-making, but would occasionally offer advice which surprised Ikhmenev by its unusual business acumen and practical common sense. Evidently he not only disliked profligacy, but was also adept at accumulating wealth. About five years after his visit to Vasilevskoye he gave Nikolai Sergeich power of attorney to purchase another excellent estate of roughly four hundred souls in the same province. Nikolai Sergeich was in a transport of delight; he took to heart the Prince's success, and the

reports of his achievements and triumphs gladdened him as if his employer had been his own brother. His exultation reached its peak, however, when on one occasion the Prince truly demonstrated his complete and utter trust in him. This is what happened… but first I feel I should supply some personal details about this Prince Valkovsky, who in a way is one of the most important characters in my story.

4

I HAVE ALREADY MENTIONED that he was a widower. He had married at a very early age, and for money. From his parents, who had suffered complete financial ruin in Moscow, he received next to nothing. Vasilevskoye had been mortgaged and remortgaged; his debts were enormous. The twenty-two-year-old Prince, obliged to work in some government office in Moscow, hadn't two kopecks to rub together, and he entered adult life as "a pauper – scion of an ancient line".* His marriage to the over-ripened daughter of a wine dealer saved him. The latter of course short-changed him over the dowry; nevertheless, the money he did receive helped him to redeem his ancestral seat and get back on his feet again. His new wife was no beauty, was barely literate and couldn't even string two words together coherently, but she had *one* important quality – she was kind and compliant. The Prince took full advantage of this. After a year of marriage, around the time his wife bore him a son, he left her in the care of her father in Moscow and moved to another district, where he secured a fairly prominent post for himself through the patronage of an influential relative in St Petersburg. He longed for a career, honours and recognition, but when he realized that he could not afford to live with his wife in either St Petersburg or Moscow, he resolved to work his way up from a provincial post in the expectation of better things to come. It was said that even in their first year of marriage his cruelty nearly drove his wife to suicide. This rumour always made Nikolai Sergeich extremely angry, and he loyally defended the Prince, maintaining that he was incapable of a dishonourable act. But about seven years later the Princess died and

the widower immediately moved to St Petersburg. His arrival there attracted considerable attention. Still young and handsome, wealthy, with a ready wit, good taste and inexhaustible good humour, he arrived on the scene not as a fortune-hunter and seeker of patronage, but as a man of more or less independent means. People said that there really was something disarming, captivating and compelling about him. He was very popular with the ladies, and an affair with a society beauty brought him a good deal of notoriety. Though he had an inborn sense of thrift bordering on parsimony, he would if occasion required throw his money around with careless abandon, quite happy to let people who might be useful to him win huge sums from him at cards, without batting an eyelid. But he had not come to St Petersburg for amusement. His aim was to forge his way in the world and establish himself in a career once and for all. He succeeded. His eminent relative Count Nainsky, who wouldn't have deigned to notice him had he arrived like any other favour-seeker, was astonished by his social success and felt it appropriate and convenient to pay him his august attention, and as a special mark of favour even to take his seven-year-old son into his own family. The Prince's visit to Vasilevskoye and his acquaintance with the Ikhmenevs dates from this period. Finally, having through the Count's good offices obtained a very prestigious post in one of the most important consulates, he set off for foreign parts. Further reports of him then became somewhat vague. There was talk of an unpleasant incident he had been involved in abroad, but no one could say exactly what it was. All that was known was that he had managed to purchase an additional four hundred souls, as I've already mentioned. He returned home many years later, with a distinguished service record, and immediately took up a very senior post in St Petersburg. Rumour was rife in Ikhmenevka that he was to marry again, this time into a notable, wealthy and powerful family. "He's set his sights high!" Nikolai Sergeich would observe, rubbing his hands with glee. I was then at St Petersburg University, and I remember Ikhmenev writing to me to ask whether these rumours of marriage were true. He also wrote to the Prince, asking him for patronage for me, but the Prince did not reply to his letter. All I knew was that the Prince's son had been brought up by the Count, had subsequently attended a *lycée*, and had finished his

schooling there at the age of nineteen. I wrote to the Ikhmenevs telling them about this, and also to say that the Prince was very fond of his son, whom he spoilt and whose future he was already planning. I discovered all this from my fellow students who knew the young man. One fine morning about this time Nikolai Sergeich received a letter from the Prince, which surprised him immensely…

The Prince, who as I have already mentioned had until recently limited his relations with Nikolai Sergeich strictly to matter-of-fact business correspondence, now wrote to him about his family circumstances in the most detailed, frank and friendly manner. He complained about his son, whose behaviour was causing him much distress; he confided that of course one could not take the pranks of someone so young too seriously (this was manifestly an attempt to excuse him), but that he had decided to punish the boy and teach him a lesson by sending him off into the country for a time and placing him under Ikhmenev's care. The Prince wrote that he was relying totally on "his good, kind Nikolai Sergeich, and especially on Anna Andreyevna", begging them to accept his ne'er-do-well into their family, to drum some sense into him in their rural seclusion, if at all possible to show him some love and affection, and most important of all, to reform his frivolous character and "instil in him those strict and salutary standards which are so essential in everyday life". Needless to say, Ikhmenev responded with enthusiasm. The young prince arrived, and was welcomed like a son. Nikolai Sergeich soon grew to love him with all his heart, no less than he did his own Natasha. Years later, long after the final rift between his father and Ikhmenev, the latter would still sometimes delight in remembering "my Alyosha", as he was wont to call the young Prince Alexei Petrovich. He was indeed a most charming lad – handsome, delicate-looking and as highly strung as a woman, but with a cheerful disposition, an open soul capable of the noblest sentiments and a loving, upright and responsive nature. He became the idol of the Ikhmenev household. Despite his nineteen years he was still a child at heart. It was difficult to conceive why his father, who was said to love him very much, should have banished him. People said that the young man had led an idle, profligate life in St Petersburg and refused to enter public service, thus causing his father great distress. Nikolai Sergeich did not question Alyosha,

because obviously Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich had deliberately not disclosed in his letter the real reason for his son's exile from the city. To be sure, there was some talk of Alyosha's appalling irresponsibility, of a liaison with a certain lady, of a challenge to a duel, of a spectacular loss at cards; there was even rumour of some misappropriation of money, said to have been subsequently squandered. Others alleged that the Prince had sent his son away not because of any misdemeanours but for particular reasons of his own. Nikolai Sergeich rejected this rumour out of hand because it was plain that Alyosha adored his father and, although he had hardly known him throughout his childhood and boyhood, still spoke of him with passionate admiration, from which it was quite clear that he was completely under his sway. Sometimes Alyosha also talked about a certain duchess whom he and his father had been courting at the same time, and with whom Alyosha had finally emerged the clear favourite – which had enraged his father. He always told this story with childlike candour and gusts of merry laughter, but Nikolai Sergeich would cut him short every time. Alyosha also confirmed the rumour that his father wished to remarry.

He spent almost a year in this rural exile. At regular intervals he wrote his father respectful, sensible letters and finally grew so accustomed to life in Vasilevskoye that when the Prince himself came down for the summer (giving the Ikhmenevs plenty of notice of his arrival), the young exile begged his father to let him stay on in Vasilevskoye for as long as possible, assuring him that country life was just what he needed. All Alyosha's decisions and enthusiasms stemmed from an extraordinarily nervous, not to say neurotic, sensibility, a passionate nature, a frivolity sometimes bordering on absurdity, an extreme tendency to fall victim to any external influence and a total lack of willpower. Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich listened to his request with some misgiving, and Nikolai Sergeich could hardly recognize his former friend in the Prince, who seemed to have changed dramatically. For some unexplained reason he had become extremely hostile to Nikolai Sergeich; going through the estate accounts, for instance, he displayed insufferable cupidity and an intense, miserly mistrust. All this caused the kind-hearted Ikhmenev a great deal of pain; for a long time he refused to believe what was happening. It was the exact reverse of what had taken place on the

Prince's first visit to Vasilevskoye fourteen years previously. This time he introduced himself to all the neighbours – or at any rate to those who mattered – but he never visited Nikolai Sergeich, and treated him as if he were a mere subordinate. Then suddenly something incomprehensible occurred. For no apparent reason, a great rift developed between the Prince and Nikolai Sergeich. People claimed to have overheard angry, insulting words spoken on both sides. Ikhmenev left Vasilevskoye in high dudgeon, but the matter did not end there. The whole neighbourhood was suddenly abuzz with the most odious rumours. It was said that Nikolai Sergeich, having come to understand the young prince's character, was intending to exploit all the boy's weaknesses to his own advantage; that his daughter Natasha (who by then was seventeen) had tricked the twenty-year-old into falling in love with her; that her father and mother had encouraged the affair, pretending to all and sundry they knew nothing about it; that in the end the "devious, immoral" Natasha had so totally bewitched the young man that for a whole year he hardly saw any of the eligible young ladies blooming in such abundance in the respectable households of the neighbouring landowners. Finally, rumour had it that the lovers had already agreed to get married in the village of Grigoryevo, fifteen versts from Vasilevskoye, apparently without the knowledge of Natasha's parents, but actually with their full connivance – indeed with their "sordid" encouragement. In short, the material that the local gossipmongers of both sexes managed to come up with about this affair would have more than filled an entire book. But the most astonishing thing was that the Prince had believed it all, and had travelled to Vasilevskoye solely on that account, on the intelligence of an anonymous letter sent to him in St Petersburg by someone in the locality. Of course, one would have thought that anyone who had the slightest acquaintance with Nikolai Sergeich would never have given the least credence to any of these accusations, and yet as usual, everyone was agitated, everyone talked, judgements swung, there was much head-shaking – and everyone condemned him outright. Ikhmenev, however, was too proud even to try and clear his daughter's name with the gossipmongers, and strictly forbade Anna Andreyevna to enter into any discussion of the matter with their neighbours. Natasha herself,

vilified though she was, had even a year later scarcely heard a word of all the slander and tittle-tattle. Everything was carefully kept from her and she was as happy and unsuspecting as a twelve-year-old.

In the meantime the quarrel intensified. Trouble-stirrers went to work. Talebearers and false witnesses came forward to persuade the Prince that Nikolai Sergeich's stewardship at Vasilevskoye over the years had been far from a model of rectitude. Worse still was the allegation that following the sale of some woodland three years previously he had misappropriated twelve thousand roubles in silver, and that clear and incontrovertible evidence of this could be produced in a court of law; that he had had no legal authorization from the Prince for the transaction but had acted on his own initiative, only later persuading the Prince of the need to sell, and had handed over a sum which was far less than had actually been received. Of course, it turned out that none of this was true, but the Prince believed it all and, publicly branded Nikolai Sergeich a thief. This was too much for Ikhmenev and his response was equally strong. A terrible situation ensued. Legal proceedings followed immediately. Nikolai Sergeich, unable to lay his hands on certain documents, but mostly for lack of connections and experience in dealing with such matters, ran into difficulties from the very outset. His estate was placed under distraint. At his wits' end, the old man abandoned everything and decided to move to St Petersburg to take personal charge of his legal affairs, leaving an experienced agent to run the estate for him. It seems that the Prince soon realized he had treated Ikhmenev unfairly. But the insult felt on both sides was so great that there was no question of reconciliation and the Prince, utterly furious, used every possible means to turn the matter to his advantage, which in essence meant only one thing – to deprive his former steward of his last means of subsistence.

5

AND SO THE IKHMENEVS MOVED to St Petersburg. I shall not describe my meeting with Natasha after such a long absence. She had never been out of my mind throughout those four years. Of course, I didn't fully understand my feelings for her when I thought of her, but when we met again, I soon realized that she was destined to be mine. At first, for a few days after their arrival, it seemed to me that she hadn't grown up much over the years and remained the same little girl I had known before we parted. But after that, with every passing day I was able to identify something new, something hitherto utterly unfamiliar in her, as though it had been concealed from me on purpose, as though the girl had been deliberately hiding it from me – and how delightful this process of discovery proved to be! Ikhmenev was at first irritable and bitter after their move to St Petersburg. His affairs were going badly; he fumed and fretted over documents and had no time for us. Anna Andreyevna wandered about as though lost, and at first could not make head or tail of anything. St Petersburg frightened her. She sighed and grieved; she wept for former times, for her hearth and home at Ikhmenevka, for the fact that Natasha was of age and still not spoken for, and for want of a more suitable confidant, she let me into all kinds of odd secrets.

It was at this time, shortly before their arrival, that I had finished my first novel, the one that marked the beginning of my literary career, and being a complete tiro, I at first had no idea what to do with it. I didn't mention any of this to the Ikhmenevs; as a matter of fact it nearly led to a quarrel between us, for they accused me of leading an idle life because

I hadn't got a post and wasn't looking for one. Ikhmenev, no doubt out of fatherly concern, reproached me bitterly, angrily even. But I was simply too embarrassed to tell them what I was doing. Well, how could I possibly say to them that I didn't want to go out to work and would rather write novels? So to gain time I pulled the wool over their eyes. I said I was being turned down for posts, but that I was making every effort to find one. Ikhmenev was too busy to check up on me. I remember one occasion when Natasha, having had her fill of our discussions, took me aside with a confidential air and tearfully implored me to think about my future; she questioned me and enquired what precisely I was doing, and when I wasn't forthcoming, she extracted a solemn oath from me that I wouldn't allow myself to end up as an idler and a ne'er-do-well. Though I didn't disclose even to her what I was doing, I remember that for just one word of approval from her about my work – after all, it was my first novel – I'd gladly have forgone all the flattering tributes that were subsequently paid me by the critics and literati. At long last my novel was published. Even before it appeared in print, it had caused quite a stir in the literary world. B.* was over the moon after reading my manuscript. Frankly, if there ever was a time when I was really happy, it wasn't during those first intoxicating moments of my success, but long before that, when I hadn't yet read or shown my manuscript to anyone – during those long nights of ecstatic hopes and dreams and passionate love of my work, when I had grown attached to my vision, to the characters I had created myself, as though they were my own offspring, as though they really existed – and I loved, rejoiced and grieved over them, at times even shedding quite genuine tears over my guileless hero. I can't begin to describe how happy the old folk were at my success, even though at first they were utterly taken aback. The whole thing was a complete surprise to them. Anna Andreyevna, for instance, simply couldn't accept that the widely celebrated new author was the same Vanya who… and so on and so forth, and just kept shaking her head. Ikhmenev stood his ground for a long time, and when the first rumours reached him, became agitated and carried on about my lost opportunity of a career in government service and the dissolute life that writers in general led. But constant references and allusions in journals, and finally a few favourable words

from people in whom he had complete trust, forced him to change his attitude. And when he saw that I was suddenly earning something at last, and realized the kind of money that could be made from writing, his final doubts were dispelled. By nature quick to change from mistrust to wholehearted enthusiasm, he was now happy as a child at my good fortune, and suddenly began to entertain the wildest dreams and the most radiant hopes about my prospects. Every day he would devise new opportunities and plans for me, and the things he came up with! He began to show unexpected and quite unprecedented signs of respect for me. All the same, I remember there were occasions when doubts would suddenly assail him anew, often in the very midst of the most ecstatic flights of fancy, and he would feel perplexed again.

"A scribbler, a poet! Doesn't make sense… Whoever heard of poets establishing themselves, getting on in life? They're such a bunch of scatterbrains, such a feckless lot!"

I noticed that these doubts and awkward considerations came to him mostly towards the end of the day (how vividly I recall every detail of those golden days!). At dusk Ikhmenev would always become strangely nervous, susceptible and wary. Natasha and I were aware of this, and we teased him about it. I remember how I would keep up his spirits with anecdotes about Sumarokov's generalship, about the court poet Derzhavin having a casket full of gold coins sent to him, about the Empress herself visiting the great scientist and writer Lomonosov.* I plied him with stories about Pushkin and Gogol.

"I know, my boy, I know all that," Ikhmenev would retort, perhaps hearing these stories for the first time in his life. "Hm! Listen Vanya, one thing I'm glad of is that your what-ye-m'call-it isn't poetry. Poetry, my boy, is rubbish – don't argue! I know what I'm talking about. I wish you all the very best, but poetry is sheer nonsense, an utter waste of time, I tell you! Poetry is for schoolboys, and in the end it lands you in the loony bin… So Pushkin was great, no disputing that! But it's just ditties, nothing more – very ephemeral stuff, all that… Truth to tell, I haven't had a chance to read him much… But prose, now, that's another matter altogether! Your prose writer can tell you a thing or two – well, about love for your motherland say, and virtue in general… yes! Pity I can't put it any better, my boy, but you know what I mean. I'm

saying it for your own good… All right, let's have it then!" he concluded with a show of interest after I had brought the book along at last and we were all seated at the round table after tea. "Let's hear what it is you've concocted. People are saying no end of things about you! Let's see, let's see!"

I opened my novel and prepared to read. It had been published that very evening, and when I finally obtained a copy, I had rushed straight to the Ikhmenevs to read it to them.

I had been upset at not being able to do this earlier from the manuscript, but it had been at the printers'. Natasha had actually cried with disappointment; she remonstrated with me and reproached me that strangers would read my novel before she did… But there we were at last sitting round the table. Ikhmenev affected a very serious and critical expression. He wanted to be a strict, impartial judge – "to decide for himself". Dear old Anna Andreyevna also assumed a most solemn air – I'm not sure that she didn't put on a new bonnet for the occasion. She had already been aware for some time that I worshipped her precious Natasha, that I choked and things went blank in front of my eyes whenever I spoke to her, and that Natasha herself was beginning to regard me a little more kindly than previously. Yes, at long last this was it, this was the moment of glory, the realization of golden hopes, complete happiness, everything had come at once, at a stroke! Also the good lady – bless her! – couldn't help noticing that her husband had begun to be rather fulsome in his praise of me and was casting meaningful glances at me and his daughter… and suddenly she took fright. After all, I was no princeling, no duke, not even a collegiate councillor, versed in law, young, handsome and sporting an order or two! Anna Andreyevna never dreamt by halves.

"They praise the young man," she mused, "but why? No one knows. An author, a poet… But what *is* an author exactly?"

6

I READ THE WHOLE OF MY NOVEL to them at a single sitting. We began immediately after tea, and stayed up till two in the morning. Ikhmenev's first reaction was a scowl. He'd been expecting something high-flown and elevated, something quite beyond his reach; but instead, it was utterly commonplace and familiar – just the kind of thing that goes on around us in everyday life. It wouldn't have been so bad if the hero had been a striking or interesting character, or some figure from the pages of history – a Roslavlev, say, or a Yury Miloslavsky* – but here we were served up with this weak, downtrodden, not to say half-witted figure of a clerk with half the buttons missing off his uniform – and all of it written in the workaday language that everyone uses… Unbelievable! Anna Andreyevna looked quizzically at Nikolai Sergeich and even screwed up her face as if offended, as if to say, "Really, to think that anybody would want to print and listen to such rubbish, and what's more, pay good money for it!" Natasha listened eagerly, didn't take her eyes off me, watched my lips for the way I pronounced each word and moved her own lovely lips. And imagine! Before I had got even halfway, my listeners were all weeping. Anna Andreyevna was shedding heartfelt tears for my hero, and to judge by her exclamations, naively wished she could somehow help him in his plight. Ikhmenev had given up all expectations of profundity. "All right, it's pretty clear that all your grand plans are pie in the sky… It's just a story like any other, but it does tug at your heartstrings," he observed, "it gives a clear and memorable picture of what's happening around you. It goes to show that even the most downtrodden, the most insignificant of us is a human

being, and he is our brother!" Natasha listened and wept, at the same time surreptitiously squeezing my hand under the table. The reading came to an end. Natasha got up; her cheeks were glowing, there were tears in her eyes; suddenly she caught hold of my hand, kissed it and rushed out of the room. A look passed between her mother and father.

"Hm! She's so excitable, isn't she, the dear child?" Ikhmenev observed, astonished at his daughter's reaction. "It's all right though, it's good, her heart's in the right place! She's a good girl…" he mumbled, casting a fleeting glance at his wife, as though trying to excuse Natasha and, while he was about it, me as well for some reason.

But Anna Andreyevna, in spite of the fact that she clearly had been disturbed and moved by the reading, now returned his glance with a look of her own, which seemed to say, "It's all very well, but let's not get carried away."

Natasha was soon back, cheerful and happy, and, as she passed behind me, pinched me playfully. Ikhmenev was once more about to act the serious critic, but, overcome with joy, launched forth instead with:

"Well, Vanya, my boy, this is good, very good! You've done us proud! I didn't expect anything like it. Nothing grand, nothing elevated, that much is clear… Take *The Liberation of Moscow*,* I've a copy here – that's where it was written too, Moscow – well, you can see in the first line, my boy, the author soars like an eagle… But you know, your story, Vanya, is more down-to-earth, easier to understand. And that's why I like it, because it's easier to understand! It touches you more. It's as though you were the very person it all happened to. What's the good of all the highfaluting stuff if it's way over your head? The only thing I'd change would be the style. I'm full of praise for what you've done, of course, but you can't get away from it, it lacks elevation… Well, too late now, it's in print. Unless there's a second edition? There will be a second edition, my boy, won't there? I suppose that'll mean more money, eh!"

"Did you really get all that much money for it, Ivan Petrovich?" Anna Andreyevna asked. "I can't help being amazed when I think about it. Goodness, so that's what people are getting paid good money for now, is it!?"

"You know, Vanya," Ikhmenev continued, getting carried away more and more, "this might not be government service, but at least it's a job. You never know, some bigwigs might read it. You were saying Gogol's on an annual retainer and has been sent abroad. Well, couldn't you be too? Eh? Or is it too early for that yet? You need to write more, I dare say. Well, get on with it, my boy, get on with it! It won't do to rest on your laurels. No use dawdling!"

And he spoke with such conviction, such good humour, that I didn't have the heart to spoil his flights of fancy.

"Or they might give you a snuffbox… Well, you shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. They'll want to encourage you… And who knows, you might even be presented at Court," he added in a half-whisper, throwing me a significant sidelong glance, "what do you think? Or is it early days for the Court?"

"Court indeed!" Anna Andreyevna said, as though offended by the idea.

"You'll be making me a general before long," I replied, laughing heartily.

Ikhmenev laughed too. He was exceedingly happy.

"Your Excellency, dinner is served!" Natasha suddenly called out excitedly. While we were talking, she had been putting together some supper for us. Then she burst out laughing, ran up to her father and hugged him warmly.

"Aren't you a good, kind Daddy!"

The old man was touched.

"Yes, yes, all right, that'll do! I was only joking. General or no general, let's go and have supper… My sweetest little pet!" he added, patting Natasha's flushed cheek. He loved doing this at every possible opportunity. "You see, Vanya, I meant it as a compliment. You may not make it to the rank of general – there's many a slip… nevertheless, now you're a storyteller, you can hold your head high!"

"'Author', Daddy, 'author''s the word."

"Not 'storyteller'? I didn't know that. Oh well, have it your way. As I was saying, they're not going to promote you to chamberlain just for writing a novel, that's for sure. All the same, it gives you an opening, you might become an attaché perhaps. You might get posted abroad –

to Italy, say – to improve your health or education, or something like that. They might even help you out with money. Needless to say, you've got to prove yourself worthy of it all. It's got to be well deserved. Money and honours should be the reward of toil and sweat, not just come by without any effort, simply through patronage…"

"Don't let it all go to your head, Ivan Petrovich," Anna Andreyevna added with a laugh.

"You might as well give him the Chevalier Star* while you're about it, Daddy – all you can think of is 'attaché'!" and Natasha pinched my arm again.

"There she goes, poking fun at me again!" Ikhmenev exclaimed, looking admiringly at Natasha's rosy cheeks and bright, sparkling eyes. "I must admit, my children, I really went too far, building castles in the air. I'll never change… the only thing is, Vanya – when I look at you, you're so uncommonly ordinary-looking…"

"Good heavens! What do you expect him to look like then, Daddy?"

"No, I didn't mean that. But it's your face, Vanya… to me there's nothing poetic about it… You know, they say poets are a pale-faced lot on the whole – and, well, their hair… there's something about their eyes too… Take someone like Goethe for instance… There's a character like that in *Abbaddonna**… now what? Have I said the wrong thing again? Look at her laughing at me, the little tease! I'm not a learned man, my darlings – I just say what I feel. What's in a face after all? One is as good as another. I've nothing against yours… It's perfectly all right… that's not what I meant at all… The main thing is, Vanya, you must never be dishonest, that's the most important thing – you must never be dishonest, never overreach yourself! You've got everything going for you, my boy. Follow your trade conscientiously, that's what I meant, yes, that's what I meant to say!"

Happy days! I spent all my free evenings with them. I would bring Ikhmenev the latest news about the literary world and writers in whom he had inexplicably begun to take an interest all of a sudden; he had even started to read B.'s critical articles. I talked to him at length about B., who was mostly over his head, though he praised him to the skies and spoke bitterly of his enemies, his fellow contributors to *The Northern Drone*. Anna Andreyevna kept a sharp eye on Natasha and

me – but, as it turned out, not sharp enough! We already had an understanding – I had heard Natasha, her eyes lowered and lips slightly parted, say to me almost in a whisper, *Yes*. The old couple got to know about it; they talked about it and they thought about it; Anna Andreyevna just kept shaking her head. She was uneasy and frightened. She had no faith in me.

"You've been lucky, Ivan Petrovich," she would say, "but supposing your luck were suddenly to run out or something – what then? If only you had a regular job!"

And Ikhmenev, after some reflection, said, "Vanya, I'll say this to you. I've been observing you. It hasn't escaped me. I was even glad that you and Natasha… well, you know what I mean! You see, Vanya, you're both still very young, and my Anna Andreyevna's perfectly right. Let's just wait a little! You've got talent, quite exceptional talent, to be sure… You're not exactly a genius, as they all hailed you at first, but you've got talent all the same. I read this piece about you in today's *Drone*. They really don't think much of you there, do they? But then what is one to expect? That's the sort of paper it is! You know, with respect, talent still doesn't equal money in the bank, and both of you are poor. Let's wait eighteen months, or at least a year. If you do all right, once you get a foot on the ladder – Natasha's yours. If not – be reasonable!… You're a sensible chap. Think about it!…"

And that's how the matter was left. A year later this is what happened.

Yes, it was almost exactly a year later! One bright September day, late in the afternoon, sick in body and soul, I called on the old couple and slumped into a chair, almost unconscious, giving them both a dreadful fright. But the reason my head was spinning and my heart was rent as I approached their front door a dozen times – and a dozen times drew back before I eventually entered – was not because my career was unsuccessful, or because I still had neither fame nor fortune; nor was it because I still hadn't been made an attaché and there was no prospect of my being sent to Italy for my health. It was because it is possible to age ten years in one year, and this was what had happened to my Natasha too. An infinite gulf had opened between us… And I remember sitting, facing Ikhmenev, unconsciously picking at the worn rim of my hat; I sat and waited – goodness only knows why – for Natasha to

appear. My ill-fitting suit was shabby, my face drawn, wasted and sallow – and yet I looked nothing like a poet and there was no fire in my eyes – the thing that had troubled the good Nikolai Sergeich so much at one time. Anna Andreyevna kept eyeing me with unfeigned, altogether excessive pity, no doubt saying to herself, "To think that someone like this nearly married our Natasha! O Lord, bless and protect us!"

"Ivan Petrovich, won't you have some tea?" she said in a doleful voice, which I recall as if it were yesterday (the samovar was simmering on the table), "and how are you keeping, my dear? You do look poorly!"

And I can still clearly see her talking to me with her eyes full of yet another worry – the same that was clouding Ikhmenev's face as he sat brooding while his tea was going cold. I knew that they were greatly preoccupied with their court case against Prince Valkovsky, which had taken a turn for the worse, and that a new calamity had befallen them, upsetting Nikolai Sergeich to the point of making him ill. The young prince – the real cause of the instigation of legal proceedings – had found an excuse to drop in on the Ikhmenevs some five months before. Ikhmenev, who loved Alyosha as if he were his own son and thought of him almost every day, received him joyfully. Anna Andreyevna thought of Vasìlevskoye, and burst into tears. Alyosha started calling on them more and more frequently, without his father's knowledge. Nikolai Sergeich, utterly open, upright and above board as he was, threw all caution to the winds. Out of honest pride he refused even to speculate as to what the Prince might say if he found out that his son was again being welcomed in their home, and dismissed from his mind all the preposterous suspicions that the Prince might harbour. But Ikhmenev was not sure if he would be strong enough to bear any fresh indignities. The young prince began to call on them nearly every day. The old couple enjoyed his company. He would sit with them evening after evening, and sometimes into the small hours. Naturally his father got to know about it. Things took another scandalous turn. The Prince wrote Nikolai Sergeich an extremely offensive letter along the same lines as before, and absolutely forbade his son to call on the Ikhmenevs. This occurred a fortnight before I went to see them. Nikolai Sergeich was terribly upset. To think that his innocent and noble-hearted

Natasha might once again be embroiled in this sordid affair, this ignominy! Her name had already been on the lips of the person who had wronged him… and to leave all this unchallenged! For the next few days he was in despair and took to his bed. I knew all about this. The story had reached me in every detail, even though I was sick and depressed myself and had not been to see the Ikhmenevs, having spent the past three weeks or so confined to my bed. But I also knew – no! – at that time I merely surmised – I knew, but refused to believe – that apart from this business there was also something else that was destroying their peace of mind even more, and I observed them with an aching heart. Yes, I suffered; I was afraid of being proven right, I was afraid to credit my own intuition, and with all my strength tried to dismiss the fateful moment that was approaching. But that is precisely what compelled me to go to see them. It was as if I had been specially drawn to them that evening!

"Vanya," Ikhmenev began, as though coming out of a reverie, "you haven't been ill, have you? Why haven't you been to see us all this time? I owe you an apology myself, I've been meaning to look you up for some time now, but there was always something…" and he looked pensive again.

"I've been unwell," I said.

"Hm! Unwell!" he repeated after a long pause. "Unwell! Didn't I tell you so, didn't I warn you – but did you listen? Hm! No, Vanya, old chap, from time immemorial the Muse has been forced to starve in the garret, and that's how it'll always be. You mark my words!"

Yes, the old man was out of sorts. If it hadn't been for his own troubles, I don't think he would have brought up the hungry Muse in our conversation. I studied his face. It had grown sallow, his eyes expressed bafflement; there lurked some kind of a thought in them in the form of a question to which he was unable to find an answer. He was abrupt and uncharacteristically ill tempered. His wife eyed him anxiously and kept shaking her head. When he happened to turn away from her briefly, she surreptitiously motioned with her head towards him.

"How's Natalya Nikolayevna?" I asked. "Is she in?"

"Yes, she is, my dear, she is," she answered, in a way that suggested my question had clearly put her in a quandary. "She'll come and say hello to you in just a moment. Heavens! It's been three weeks since you last saw each other! I sometimes worry about her – she's been so strange lately. You can never tell with her if she's well or ill, bless her!" And she glanced meekly at her husband.

"What do you mean?" Nikolai Sergeich struck in, haltingly and moodily. "There's nothing the matter with her. "She's perfectly all right. The girl's entering womanhood, she's no longer a child – that's all there is to it. As if anyone could make head or tail of all these women's moods and tantrums!"

"Tantrums indeed!" Anna Andreyevna retorted in an offended tone.

Ikhmenev didn't say anything more, but drummed a tattoo on the table with his fingertips. My God, I thought fearfully, was there anything the matter between the two of them?

"Well, so how are things with you?" he began once more. "What about B., still writing his criticisms, is he?"

"Yes, he is," I replied.

"Well, well, Vanya, my boy!" he concluded with a dismissive gesture of his hand. "Where will criticisms get you?"

The door opened, and Natasha entered the room.

7

SHE WAS HOLDING HER LITTLE HAT in her hands and when she came into the room, put it down on the piano; then she approached me and offered her hand in silence. Her lips moved slightly as though she wanted to say something – a word of greeting perhaps – but she said nothing.

Three weeks – three weeks we hadn't seen each other! I gazed at her in consternation and fear. How she had changed! I was mortified to see her pale sunken cheeks, her chapped lips as if she had a fever, and her eyes under her long, dark eyelashes flaming with passionate resolve.

But by God, she looked wonderful! Never, neither before nor since, have I seen her quite as lovely as she was on that fateful day. Was this really the same Natasha, the same girl who only a year previously had not been able to take her eyes off me, had moved her lips with mine as she listened to me reading my novel, and had been so carefree and cheerful as she laughed and joked with her father and me over supper? Was this the same Natasha who, in that room over there, head bowed and cheeks flushed, had once said *yes* to me?

The muted sound of the church bell ringing for vespers reached us. She shuddered, and the old lady crossed herself.

"You were going to church, Natasha, there's the bell for you," she said. "Go along, Natasha, my dear, I beg you – a prayer will do you a power of good! So will a little walk. Won't do to stay indoors all the time! Just look how pale you are, as though you had the evil eye on you."

"Perhaps… I… shan't go tonight after all," Natasha said slowly and softly, almost in a whisper. "I don't… feel well," she added, and turned as white as a sheet.

"You should, Natasha," Anna Andreyevna pleaded, looking at her daughter timidly as though in fear of her. "You were so keen to go just now – and you brought your hat… Go and say a prayer, Natasha, my angel, for God to grant you good health."

"Yes, why don't you? A walk will do you good," Ikhmenev added, also looking at his daughter with concern. "Mother's right. There, Vanya will go with you."

It seemed to me that a bitter smile flitted across Natasha's face. She walked to the piano, took her hat and put it on; her hands were shaking. All her movements seemed somehow involuntary as though she were unsure what she was doing. Her mother and father watched her anxiously.

"Goodbye!" she said almost inaudibly.

"My angel, why say goodbye, you're not going far, are you? A breath of fresh air is what you need. Look how pale you are! Goodness, I forgot all about it – I'm always forgetting things! I've made an amulet for you with a prayer in it, my angel. A nun from Kiev taught me it last year. It's a lovely prayer – I stitched it in the other day. Put it round your neck, Natasha. Let's pray that God will grant you good health. You're all we've got."

And the old lady took Natasha's gold crucifix out of her workbox. The amulet was on the same ribbon.

"May it save and protect you!" she added, putting the crucifix round Natasha's neck and making the sign of the cross over her. "Times were I'd make the sign of the cross over you and say a prayer every night before you went to sleep, and you'd repeat it after me. But you've changed, and the Lord has taken away your peace of mind. Oh, Natasha, Natasha! Not even your mother's prayers can help you now!" And Anna Andreyevna began to cry.

Natasha kissed her hand in silence and took a step towards the door, but suddenly she turned back and went quickly up to her father. Her breast was heaving.

"Daddy! I want you too to make the sign of the cross over me… your daughter," she said, her voice breaking as she knelt before him.

We were all thrown into confusion by her unexpected and, as it seemed then, over-solemn gesture. Her father looked at her for a few seconds in utter bewilderment.

"My darling Natasha, my child, my dearest daughter! What's wrong?" he cried out, tears streaming from his eyes. "Why are you so sad? Why do you cry day and night? I've been watching you – I've not slept myself for nights on end, getting up to listen at your door!… Tell me everything, Natasha, confide in me, old man that I am, and we…"

He didn't finish, but raised her to her feet and hugged her. She clung desperately to his chest and nestled her head against his shoulder.

"It's all right, it's all right – it's just that… I'm not well…" she kept repeating, breathlessly suppressing a torrent of tears.

"May God bless you, as I am blessing you, my dear child, my precious one!" her father said. "May He send you peace of mind for ever and protect you from all sorrows. Pray to God, my child, that He may hear a sinner's prayer!"

"And mine, my blessings on you too!" the old lady added, dissolving into tears.

"Goodbye!" Natasha whispered.

She stopped in the doorway, looked at them once more as if she were about to say something but couldn't, and quickly left the room. I hurried after her with a heavy presentiment in my heart.

8

SHE WALKED ALONG QUICKLY, in silence, her head bowed, not looking at me. But at the end of the street, on reaching the embankment, she stopped and seized me by the hand.

"I can't breathe!" she whispered. "My heart… I can't breathe!"

"Go back, Natasha!" I exclaimed in alarm.

"Can't you see, Vanya? I've left *for good*, I've left them and I'll never return," she said, looking at me in utter despondency.

My heart sank. I'd foreseen this while I was on my way to visit them – and I sensed it faintly, as through a mist, perhaps long before this day. Nevertheless, her words now struck me like a thunderbolt.

We walked downcast along the embankment. I was unable to speak; I kept turning things over in my mind, I thought about it all and became totally confused. My head was spinning. It seemed to me so monstrous, so unreasonable!

"Do you blame me, Vanya, for what I've done?" she asked after a long silence.

"No, but… but I don't believe it. It can't be true!…" I replied, only dimly aware of what I was saying.

"Yes, Vanya, it is true! I've left them, and I don't know what will become of them… and I don't know what will become of *me*!"

"You're going to see *him*, Natasha, aren't you?

"Yes!" she replied.

"But that's impossible!" I exclaimed in desperation. "Don't you realize it's just not possible, Natasha, my poor darling! It's sheer

madness. Don't you realize you'll kill them and destroy yourself! Have you thought about that, Natasha?"

"I have, but what am I to do? I can't help it," she said, and her voice was full of despair, as though she were going to her death.

"Go back, go back before it's too late," I implored her, and the more passionate and insistent I became, the more aware I was of the utter futility and inappropriateness of my entreaties at that moment. "Do you understand, Natasha, what this will do to your father? Have you considered that? Don't you know that Alyosha's father is your father's enemy? Have you forgotten that the Prince insulted your father, accused him of embezzling money, and called him a thief? That there's a legal battle going on… But never mind that! There's more to it, don't you realize, Natasha?… (Oh God! It's not as if you didn't know all that!) Surely you know that the Prince accused your mother and father of deliberately bringing you and Alyosha together when Alyosha stayed at your house in the country? Think, just think what your father must have been going through because of this slander. He's gone completely grey these last two years – haven't you noticed? But the main thing is that you know all this, Natasha. Oh God! I daren't even begin to think what would happen to them if they lost you for ever! You're their treasure, all they have left in their old age. I don't even want to talk about it – you should realize all this yourself. Don't forget your father believes you've been deliberately vilified and slandered by all those arrogant people – and they've got away with it! But now, right now, everything's blown up again, the old wound has been reopened, because you've been receiving Alyosha in your home. The Prince has insulted your father again, who's still getting over this new shock and then suddenly finds all of it, all these accusations, justified after all! Everyone who knows about this will stop blaming the Prince and blame you and your father instead. Well, what's going to happen to him? It will kill him! Humiliation, disgrace – and who is the cause? His daughter, his one and only precious child! And what about your mother? She won't outlive your father… Natasha, Natasha!… What are you doing? Come to your senses! Go back!"

She didn't say a word; finally she looked at me with reproach in her eyes, and I saw so much pain there, so much suffering, that I realized

how deeply wounded she was, even without my making it worse. I knew what her decision must have cost her, and how I was hurting and tormenting her with my worthless and belated commentary; I knew all this, but nevertheless could not restrain myself, and went on.

"Didn't you say to Anna Andreyevna just now that *perhaps* you wouldn't go to… vespers? So you'd have liked to stay – you hadn't quite made up your mind then, had you?"

Her only reply was a bitter smile. Why did I have to ask that? I ought to have known that everything had already been decided irrevocably. But I too was beside myself.

"Have you really fallen in love with him that much?" I demanded, staring at her with a sinking heart, and hardly aware of what I was asking.

"What can I say to you, Vanya? Can't you see for yourself! He told me to come, and here I am, waiting for him," she said with the same bitter smile.

"But listen, just listen to me," I began to plead again catching at a straw. "All this can still be sorted out, there must be another way, there must be some other way out altogether! There's no need to leave home. I'll show you what to do, my darling Natasha. I'll see to everything for you, everything, your meetings too, and all the rest of it… Only don't leave home!… I'll be your go-between. Why not? Anything's better than this. Leave it all to me, I won't let you down, you'll see, I really won't… And you won't be distressing yourself, my darling, as you're doing now… Just look at what you're doing to yourself now! Come, Natasha, everything will turn out for the best, and you'll be able to love each other as much as you want… And when your father and his father stop their feuding, as I'm sure they will, then…"

"That's enough, Vanya, don't go on," she interrupted, squeezing my hand firmly, and smiling through tears. "My good, kind Vanya! How marvellous and honest you are! And you've not said a word about yourself! It was I who deserted you first, and you've forgiven me everything, all you think of is my happiness. You want to be our go-between…"

She burst into tears.

"I know, Vanya, how much you loved me, how much you still do, and not an angry word, not a single bitter word of reproach have I heard from you all this time! But I, I… My God, I feel so guilty! Do you remember, Vanya, do you remember our times together? Oh, if only I'd never seen or met *him* at all!… I'd have lived with you, Vanya, with you, my good darling boy!… No, I'm not worthy of you! You see what I'm like – even at a moment like this I'm reminding you of our happiness in the past, as though you hadn't been hurt enough already! Now, you haven't been to see us for three weeks. I swear to you though, Vanya, it never occurred to me that you might have cursed or hated me. I know why you stayed away – you didn't want to be a burden and a living reproach to us. But surely you must have felt awful seeing us together! And how I waited for you, Vanya, how I waited for you! Listen, Vanya, even if I do love Alyosha – madly, insanely – perhaps I love you even more, as a friend. I feel it, I know I couldn't survive without you. I need you, I need your heart of gold, your soul… Oh Vanya! What bitter, what hard times lie ahead of us!"

She broke down in a flood of tears. She was utterly distraught.

"Oh, how I was longing to see you!" she continued, suppressing her tears. "How thin, how sickly, how pale you look. Have you really been unwell, Vanya? There, I haven't even asked after you! I go on and on about myself. Well, how have you been getting on with the critics? What about your new novel, is it coming along?"

"Never mind me and my novels, Natasha! You don't want to hear about my affairs! They're all right – who cares? But look here, Natasha, was it he who insisted you should go to him?"

"No, not just him, it was me for the most part. True, he did talk about it, but it was really me… Look, my darling, I'll tell you everything. They've found him a fiancée who's wealthy and comes from a very good family. She belongs to one of the best. His father definitely wants the marriage to go ahead, and of course you know what the man's like – an awful schemer. He's left no stone unturned. For him it's the chance of a lifetime. Connections, money… And they say she's very beautiful, well educated too, and kind – she's a perfect match for him. Alyosha's very fond of her. And besides, his father can't wait to get him off his hands to pave the way for his own marriage – that's why he's so

determined to put an end to our relationship, come what may. He's afraid of me and the influence I have on Alyosha…"

"Surely," I interrupted her in surprise, "surely the Prince doesn't know you love each other! He might have had his suspicions, but he couldn't have been certain."

"He knows, he knows everything."

"But who told him?"

"Alyosha did, not long ago. He said he'd told his father everything."

"Good God! What on earth's going on between you! Do you mean to say he told his father everything, at a time like this—"

"Don't blame him, Vanya," Natasha interrupted, "don't make fun of him! He shouldn't be judged like everyone else. Be fair. He's not like you and me. He's so immature. His upbringing doesn't help either. Do you think he understands what he's doing? The first impression, the first outside influence can put him off everything that he's sworn to only a minute earlier. He has no strength of character. He'll swear eternal fidelity to you one day, and the next he'll just as openly, just as sincerely change sides – and what's more he'll be the first to come and tell you all about it. He might even do something awful, but you couldn't possibly hold it against him, only feel sorry for him. Not that he's incapable of self-sacrifice, you'd be amazed! But only until something else takes his fancy, then he'll forget everything again. He'll forget me too, unless I'm constantly beside him. That's just how he is!"

"Oh Natasha, perhaps none of this is true, just rumour. How can someone so immature get married!"

"I'm telling you, his father's behind it all."

"And how do you know his bride is so beautiful, and that he's so fond of her?"

"Because he told me so himself."

"What? He told you himself he can love another woman, and still ask you to sacrifice yourself for him?"

"No, Vanya, no! You don't know him, you've seen so little of him. You've got to get to know him better before you judge. There's no one in the world more truthful and pure of heart, believe me! Would you really rather he'd lied? And as for his being easily infatuated with someone else, I only need to let him out of my sight for a week and he'll

have forgotten me altogether, but the minute he sees me he'll be at my feet again. Yes, it's just as well I'm aware of what's going on and that it's not happening behind my back, or my suspicions would have driven me to my grave. Yes, Vanya, this much I do know – unless I'm with him all the time, constantly, every waking minute, he'll stop loving me, forget me, and desert me. That's the way he is – any woman can lure him away. And where would I be then? I'd die… But that wouldn't be the worst of it! I'd gladly die this very moment! How could I live without him? It would be worse than death, worse than any torture! Oh Vanya, Vanya! Surely you can see now I wouldn't have left mother and father lightly! Don't try to talk me out of it – everything's been decided! I must be by his side every hour, every minute. I can't go back. I know I've ruined myself and I've ruined others… Oh Vanya!" she exclaimed, and began to tremble all over. "What if he really no longer loves me! What if what you've just said about him is really true, that he's only deceiving me and pretending to be truthful and honest," (I had never said anything of the sort) "but in reality is evil and vain! I'm standing up for him now, yet for all I know he may well be with another woman at this very moment, mocking me in his heart… and here am I, low and despicable, walking the streets looking for him, having turned my back on everything… Oh Vanya!"

Natasha uttered this with such pain that it shook me to the core. I realized that she had lost all control over herself. Only blind, insane jealousy at its most extreme could have led her to such a perverse decision. But jealousy welled up in me too, and burst from my heart. I could bear it no longer – a vile impulse swept me along.

"Natasha," I said, "there's only one thing that puzzles me – how can you still love him after what you've just said about him? You don't respect him, you don't even believe in his love for you – and yet here you are, completely surrendering yourself to him, and destroying everybody else for his sake! What is all this? He'll ruin your whole life, and you'll ruin his. You love him too much, Natasha, far too much! I don't understand such love!"

"Yes, I love him madly," she replied, going pale as though she were in physical pain. "I never loved you as much as that, Vanya. I realize myself that I've lost control of my senses and that I shouldn't love him

as I do. It's an unwholesome love that I feel for him… Listen, Vanya, I knew all along, even in our most blissful moments together I felt he would bring me nothing but pain. But what am I to do now if even the pain he causes means happiness for me? Do you imagine I expect him to make my life a joy? Do you think I don't know what I'm letting myself in for, what I'll have to go through because of him? He swore he loved me and was full of promises, but they're worthless and I don't trust a single one of them, and never have, even though I know he's never lied to me and is incapable of telling a lie. I told him myself I don't want to tie him down in any way. It's better for him. No one likes being tied down, least of all me. And yet I'd be happy to be his slave, his willing slave, to put up with absolutely anything from him as long as he was with me, as long as I could just look at him! I think I'd even put up with him loving another woman, as long as I was with him, as long as I was there with the two of them… Isn't it disgusting, Vanya?" she suddenly exclaimed, looking at me with feverish, blazing eyes. For a moment I imagined she was delirious. "It's disgusting to wish for such a thing, isn't it? Well? I admit it's disgusting, but if he were to reject me, I'd still run after him to the ends of the earth – even if he were to push me aside and chase me away. There you are, trying to persuade me to turn back – but what good would that do? Even if I did return, I'd only go back to him the very next day. He'd only have to say the word – and I'd be back. He'd only have to whistle, call me and I'd run to him like a puppy to her master… Suffering! I'm not afraid of any suffering! It would be enough to know that it was because of *him* I was suffering… Oh, you've no idea, Vanya!"

"And what about your father and mother?" I thought to myself. It was as though she had already forgotten them.

"So he's not going to marry you after all, Natasha?"

"He promised, he promised everything. That's precisely why he wants me to go to him now, so that we can get married tomorrow with no fuss, in the country. But he doesn't know what he's doing. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he just didn't know how to go about it. And what sort of a husband would he make? It's just too ridiculous for words. And if he did marry, he'd be unhappy, and start reproaching me… I'd hate it if he were ever to reproach me for anything. I'd let him have

everything, and ask for nothing in return. If marriage is to make him miserable, why make him miserable?"

"No, this is all a bad dream, Natasha," I said. "Are you going straight to him now?"

"No, he promised to come here and fetch me. We agreed…" And she looked in desperation along the embankment, but there was no one to be seen.

"And he's not here yet! You arrived *first*!" I exclaimed with indignation. Natasha's features were suddenly contorted in pain as though she had been dealt a blow.

"He may not even turn up at all," she said with a bitter smile. "The other day he wrote that if I didn't promise to meet him, he'd be obliged to postpone his decision to… marry me, and his father would take him to his fiancée. He put it all so simply, so naturally, as though it really didn't matter at all… What if he really has gone to *her*, Vanya?"

I did not reply. She squeezed my hand tightly, and her eyes began to glint.

"He's with her," she said almost inaudibly. "He hoped I wouldn't come here, so that he could go to her and then claim he was right after all, that he'd informed me in good time and that it was I that hadn't turned up. He's had enough of me, that's why he's staying away… Oh God! I'm going mad! Do you know, he told me last time that he'd had enough of me… So what am I waiting for!"

"There he is!" I cried out, suddenly catching sight of him in the distance on the embankment.

Natasha shook all over, let out a cry, fixed her gaze on Alyosha as he approached and then, suddenly letting go of my hand, rushed towards him. He too quickened his pace, and a moment later she was in his arms. Apart from us the street was almost deserted. They kissed and laughed; Natasha laughed and cried all at the same time, as though they had come together after an interminable separation. Her pale cheeks flushed with colour; she was almost frantic. Alyosha noticed me and immediately came up to me.

9

I STARED AT HIM INTENTLY. Even though I had seen him many times before, I stared into his eyes as if by doing so I might resolve my bafflement and find an explanation as to how this callow youth could have so mesmerized her, inspired such an insane love in her – love that could have driven her to forget her foremost duty and senselessly sacrifice everything that she had until then held sacrosanct. The prince grasped my hands and squeezed them firmly; the look in his eyes, meek and shining, touched my heart.

I wondered if I might have been mistaken in my opinion of him for no other reason than that he was my rival. But no, I didn't like him and, I confess, could never like him – perhaps I was the only person who couldn't, of all those who knew him. There was a lot about him that, with the best will in the world, I couldn't stomach, including his elegant appearance, very likely because it was somehow too elegant. Subsequently I realized that in this too I was biased in my judgement. He was tall, slim and graceful, with a pale oval face, fair hair and large blue eyes – submissive and reflective, which from time to time would unexpectedly light up with the most artless, childish excitement. The solemn set of his small, full, red, perfectly shaped lips made his smile, when it suddenly appeared, all the more unexpected and engaging, and so open and unfeigned that, whatever one's mood, one couldn't help smiling in return. He did not dress exquisitely, but always elegantly, in a way which made it clear that this was perfectly effortless, that it came to him quite naturally. It is true that he was not without his faults, and that he had one or two bad habits inherited as it were by contagion from

the circle to which he belonged – superficiality, smugness and a tendency to indiscretion. But he was perfectly open and without guile, and was always the first to admit to his foibles, decry them and poke fun at himself. I don't think this childlike youth could ever, even in jest, have told a lie – and even if he had, I suspect he wouldn't have seen anything wrong in so doing. Even his selfishness was somehow appealing, perhaps just because it was so overt. There was nothing secretive about him whatsoever. He was weak, credulous and meek-hearted, and had no willpower at all. To offend or deceive him would have been as cruel and blameworthy as to offend or deceive a child. Considering his age, his naivety was astonishing and he betrayed an almost total ignorance of real life – but even at forty he would probably be no wiser. Such people are apparently condemned to perpetual immaturity. I dare say it would be a rare person indeed who didn't like him; he'd capture your affections as a child would. Natasha was absolutely right when she said that he was capable of performing an evil act under someone else's influence, but having realized the consequences, would probably have died of remorse. She felt instinctively that she could dominate him, that he would be her sacrificial lamb. She was anticipating the delight of loving to distraction and torturing the object of that love to the point of pain, in the name of that very love, and perhaps for that reason might have hastened to surrender herself *to him* in self-sacrifice first. But his eyes too shone with love, and he looked at her in rapture. She glanced at me triumphantly. At that moment she was oblivious of everything – her parents, her parting from them, her own misgivings… She was happy.

"Vanya!" she exclaimed, "I've been unfair to him and I don't deserve him! Alyosha, I'd almost given you up. Forget my nasty thoughts, Vanya, I'll make up for them!' – and she looked at him with unquenchable love. He smiled, kissed her hand and, without letting go of it said, turning to me:

"Don't blame me! I've long been meaning to embrace you as a brother. She has talked so much about you! So far we've hardly had a chance to meet or get to know each other. Let's be friends and… forgive us," he added in a low voice, blushing a little, but with such a wonderful smile that I could not help but respond wholeheartedly to such a proposition.

"Yes, yes, Alyosha," Natasha hastened to voice her approval, "he is, he is indeed our brother, he's forgiven us already, and without him we shan't be happy. As I said to you before… Oh, we're going on like cruel children, Alyosha! But we shall live together, the three of us… Vanya!" she continued, and her lips began to tremble. "Why don't you go back home to *them* now? You've such a heart of gold that even if they don't forgive me, they'll be a little less hard on me when they see that *you* have. Tell them everything, everything, *in your own words*, straight from the heart. You've got to find the words… Stand up for me, save me! Present all the arguments to them, everything, as you yourself see it. Do you know, Vanya, I'm not at all sure I'd have dared to go through with this if you hadn't turned up today! You're my salvation – I put all my hopes in you from the start, trusting you'd be able to break it to them in such a way as to soften the first blow at least. Oh, my God, my God!… Tell them, Vanya, that I realize I'm beyond forgiveness – even if they forgave me, God wouldn't! – but that even if they curse me, I'll bless them all the same and pray for them all my life long. My whole heart is with them! Oh, why aren't we all happy? Why, why?… My God! What have I done?" she cried out as though awaking from a trance and, trembling all over with fright, buried her face in her hands. Alyosha put his arm around her and held her close without saying a word. A few minutes passed in silence.

"Did you really want it to come to this?" I asked, looking at him reproachfully.

"Don't blame me!" he repeated. "I can assure you that all these misfortunes, however distressing they are, won't last long. It'll all be over in no time. I'm perfectly convinced of that. We just need to be resolute to get over this temporary difficulty. That's exactly what she said to me too. You know, family pride is at the bottom of all this, these totally unnecessary feuds, these lawsuits, and all that sort of thing!… But – I've thought about this a long time, I assure you – all this must come to an end. We shall all come together again and then we'll be perfectly happy and, just seeing us, even the old folk will make up their differences. Who knows – our marriage might lead to their reconciliation! Anyway, I don't think there's any alternative. What do you think?"

"'Marriage', you said? When exactly are you going to get married?" I asked with a glance at Natasha.

"Tomorrow or the day after – in all probability, the day after. You see, I'm not quite sure myself yet, and to tell you the truth I still haven't made any arrangements. I thought Natasha perhaps wouldn't even come today. Besides, father insisted on taking me to my fiancée today. I'm engaged, you see. Didn't Natasha tell you? But I don't want to go through with it. Well, what with one thing and another I've not been able to prepare things properly. But I'm pretty sure we'll get married the day after tomorrow. At least that's how I see it, because after all there's no alternative, is there? Tomorrow we'll definitely be on the Pskov Road. I've a friend in a nearby village, not far from here, we went to school together, he's an excellent fellow. Perhaps I'll introduce you to him. There's a priest in the village too, at least I think there is, though I can't be absolutely sure. I should have checked earlier, but I didn't have time… But anyway, these are only details. Let's not be diverted from the main thing. After all, one can always get a priest from a neighbouring village, wouldn't you say? There's always a neighbouring village! It's a shame I didn't manage to notify them beforehand. I wish I had. Come to think of it, my friend may be away now… But that's the least of our worries! All we need is determination, and the rest will fall into place – I'm right, am I not? As for now, she'll stay here with me till tomorrow, or the day after if need be. I've taken rooms, and they'll be our home too when we get back. I can hardly go back to live with Father, can I? You must come and see us. I've settled in beautifully. My old schoolmates will visit us, we'll have soirées…"

I looked at him in disbelief. Natasha implored me with her eyes not to judge him too harshly, to be more understanding. She listened to him with a pained smile, but with admiration too – the sort of admiration one has for a cheerful, favoured child as one listens to his incoherent but delightful prattle. I looked at her with reproach. I felt unbearably depressed.

"But what about your father?" I asked him. "How can you be certain he'll forgive you?"

"Absolutely. He's got no alternative! That's to say, he'll curse me to begin with, of course. I can almost be sure of that. That's the way he is,

and he's awfully strict with me. I won't be surprised if he goes around complaining about me – in a word, behaving just like a heavy-handed parent… But none of it will be serious. He loves me to distraction. His anger will blow over, and he'll forgive me. Then everyone will be reconciled and we'll all be happy, her father included."

"But what if he doesn't forgive you? Have you thought of that?"

"I've no doubt he will, only it may take a while. But what of it? I'll prove to him that I'm a man of character too. He keeps on at me that I'm lacking in character, that I'm frivolous. He'll see if I'm frivolous or not! You know, it's a serious matter, being a family man. That's when I'll reach maturity… what I mean to say is that I'll be just like everybody else… well, like all settled family people. I'll live by my own labour. Natasha says that's far better than living off other people, as we all do. If only you knew, she's so full of wisdom, is my Natasha! Otherwise it would never have occurred to me – I'm from a different background, I've had a different upbringing from hers. Of course, I know perfectly well I am frivolous, and almost incapable of doing anything constructive. But, you know, the other day I had a marvellous idea. Now's not quite the time but, what the heck! I want Natasha to hear it too, and I want to pick your brains. You see, I'd like to write novels and sell them to journals, like you do. You'll help me with the editors, won't you? I've been counting on you, I spent the whole of last night turning a story over in my mind, just trying it out, you understand – it could prove to be a terrific little idea. I pinched the plot from a comedy by Scribe*… But more of that later. The main thing is, I'll get money for it… you writers do get paid, don't you?"

I couldn't suppress a smile.

"You're laughing at me," he said, smiling in turn. "No, listen to me," he added with ineffable artlessness, "don't misunderstand me, I'm not as stupid as I look, I'm pretty observant really, you'll see for yourself. Why shouldn't I have a try? Perhaps something will come of it… On the other hand, you're probably right – I know next to nothing about real life. That's what Natasha has been saying to me, and everybody else too. What sort of a writer would I make? Go on, you can laugh as much as you like, put me right if you must – in the end you'll be doing Natasha a favour, since you love her. I'll be frank with you, I'm not worthy of

her. I feel it. It's hard for me, and I don't really know why she has fallen so deeply in love with me. For my part, I'm sure I'd be ready to die for her! Honestly, I wasn't afraid of anything until just now, but now I am. What on earth are we doing? My God, isn't it a downright shame if a man with a sense of duty suddenly loses faith and courage in himself to do the decent thing at the crucial moment! Won't you help us at least, friend that you are – our only remaining friend! What can I do on my own? I'm sorry to be putting so much reliance on you. I look up to you as a gentleman and as my better by far. But rest assured, I'll mend my ways and prove myself worthy of you both."

He again shook my hand, and his wonderful eyes lit up with goodness and warmth of feeling. He offered his hand so trustingly; he was so confident that I was his friend!

"She'll help me to mend my ways," he continued. "You mustn't jump to gloomy conclusions, there's no need to worry about us. After all, I've a lot going for me, and materially we should be perfectly well provided for. If for instance the novel doesn't succeed – frankly, it did occur to me even as I was telling you about it that the idea might be rather silly, but I mentioned it simply because I wanted to hear your opinion – if the novel doesn't succeed, then if the worst came to the worst, I could give music lessons. You didn't know I was something of a musician, did you? I shan't turn up my nose at earning a living that way. After all, I can be as progressive as the next man. Besides, I possess lots of expensive trinkets, gentleman's accoutrements. What do I need them for? I shall sell them, and you'll be surprised how long we can live on the proceeds! And if it really came to it, I might even take a government post. Father would be delighted. He's always on at me to start working, but I keep telling him I can't because of my health. I've a feeling he's already got something lined up for me. But when he sees that the marriage has done me a power of good, has brought me to my senses and that I've actually started working – he'll be over the moon and forgive me…"

"But Alexei Petrovich, have you considered the consequences for her father and for yours? Can you imagine the atmosphere in her house tonight?" And I motioned towards Natasha, who was, I suddenly saw, completely devastated by my words. I was being merciless.

"Yes, of course, you're quite right, it's awful!" he replied. "I've thought about it and agonized over it all… But what's to be done? You're right – if only her parents would forgive us! If only you knew how much I love them both! I regard them completely as my own, and look how I'm repaying them!… These squabbles and lawsuits really are the limit! You've no idea how unpleasant it all is for us! And what is it they're squabbling over? We all love one another so much, and yet we fight! How I wish they'd make up and be done with it! Seriously, that's what I'd do if I were in their place… I'm very worried by what you said. Natasha, it's terrible, what we're letting ourselves in for! I did warn you about this… You were the one who insisted… But listen, Ivan Petrovich: perhaps everything will turn out for the best – what do you think? Surely they're bound to make it up in the end! We'll see to it that they do. There's no other way, none at all! Our love will conquer all… Let them curse us – we'll carry on loving them regardless, and they're bound to give in. You won't believe how kind-hearted my papa can be! He may look daggers sometimes, but he can also be perfectly reasonable. If only you knew how warmly he spoke to me today, how he reasoned with me! And here I am, going against him – it makes me very sad. It's these wretched prejudices of his! It's enough to drive you mad! If only he'd take a good look at her and spend just half an hour with her, he'd have let us do what we want straight away." Saying this, Alyosha cast a tender, passionate glance at Natasha.

"I've imagined thousands of times, and with what delight," he prattled on, "how he'd have got on with her once he'd got to know her better, and how she'd have astonished them all. They'll never have seen a girl like that before! Father's convinced she's nothing but an out-and-out little schemer. So it's up to me to restore her reputation, and I shall do that all right! Oh, Natasha! Everyone will love you, everyone… There's no one in the world who wouldn't love you," he added exultantly. "Though I'm nowhere near good enough for you, don't give up loving me, Natasha, and rest assured I'll… you know me, don't you? Anyway, we don't need much to make us happy, do we? Yes, I believe, I do believe that after tonight we'll all be the closest and happiest of friends! Blessed be this night! I'm right, Natasha, am I not? But what's wrong, Natasha? My God, what's the matter with you?"

She had gone as white as a sheet. All the time Alyosha had been perorating, she had looked at him intently, but her eyes had become more and more glazed and vacant, her face paler and paler. It seemed to me that in the end she had hardly been listening, and had fallen into a kind of trance. Alyosha's exclamation appeared to bring her to her senses. She regained her composure, looked around – and suddenly turned towards me. Hastily, in an attempt to conceal what she was doing from Alyosha, she produced a letter from her pocket and handed it to me. It was to her parents and had been written the day before. As she gave it to me, her eyes were riveted on me. There was despair in them; I shall never forget that terrible look. I too was seized with fear; I could see that she only now fully realized the full horror of what she had done. She struggled to say something; she was about to begin, but suddenly fainted. I managed to catch her. Alyosha went pale with fright; he rubbed her temples, kissed her hands, her lips. After a couple of minutes she came to. Not far off stood the cab that had brought Alyosha; he called it to pull up closer. Getting into it, Natasha desperately grabbed my hand and I felt a hot tear run down my fingers. The cab moved off. I stood for a long time following it with my eyes. All my happiness was destroyed in a flash; my life was shattered. It all came home to me with a vengeance… I began slowly to walk back to her parents' house. I had no idea what I was going to say to them, how I would face them. My mind was numb, my legs were giving way under me…

So much for my happiness; that's how the love of my life came to an abrupt end. I shall now continue my story where I left off.

10

ABOUT FIVE DAYS AFTER SMITH'S DEATH, I moved into his lodgings. The whole of that day I was unbearably depressed. The weather was miserable, cold and sleety. It was only towards evening that the sun emerged and the odd ray, as though from curiosity, strayed into my room for a moment. I was beginning to regret having made the move. Admittedly the room was large, but the ceiling was low and the place was smoke-stained, stuffy and, apart from a few sticks of furniture, unpleasantly empty. I couldn't help feeling that I was bound to ruin my health completely there. And that is just what happened.

All that morning I was busy with my papers, sorting them out and putting them in order. Not having a briefcase, I brought them over in a pillowcase, where they had ended up in a crumpled mess. Later I sat down to write. At that time I was still working on my long novel, but with my mind on other things I couldn't make any headway…

I threw down my pen and settled by the window. It was getting dark, and my spirits were sinking. I was beset by all kinds of gloomy thoughts. I was convinced I would finally meet my end in St Petersburg. Spring was coming. What wouldn't I have given to break out of this shell into the open air, to breathe the fresh smell of fields and forests which I hadn't seen for so long?… I remember that it also occurred to me how good it would have been if by some magic or miracle I could have completely forgotten everything that had happened, everything that I had endured in recent years; forgotten the whole lot, turned over a new leaf and started afresh, my strength fully restored. At that time I was still given to daydreaming, hoping for a kind of rebirth. "Why not a

spell in a lunatic asylum?" I thought at last. "Get them somehow to reset my brain in my head and make a new man of me!" So I still had a thirst for life and faith in it!… But as I remember, this made me burst out laughing. What would I do when I came out of the asylum? Surely not go back to writing novels?…

That evening I went on ruminating along these lines and feeling sorry for myself, and meanwhile time was passing. Night was approaching. I had agreed to meet Natasha that evening; in a note sent the day before she had urged me to come and see her. I jumped to my feet and began to get ready. I needed little excuse to escape outdoors, even if it was into the rain and sleet.

As darkness fell, my room appeared to become more and more spacious – as though it were expanding. I imagined that from then on, each night, I would see Smith in every corner, sitting and staring at me unblinkingly as he had stared at Adam Ivanovich in the coffee house, with Azorka lying at his feet. It was then that something astounding happened.

But let me be perfectly frank here. Whether it was because of my nervous disorder, or the impressions my new dwelling made on me, or my recent dejection, at the first approach of dusk I would gradually, almost imperceptibly, enter that spiritual state (so familiar to me now at night-time in my illness), which I call *mystical terror*. It is a most dreadful, agonizing fear of something I cannot define, something unfathomable and non-existent in the normal course of events, but which may at any given moment materialize and confront me as an unquestionable, terrible, ghastly and implacable reality, making a mockery of all evidence of reason. This fear, totally confounding all rationalization, normally increases inexorably, so that in the end the mind – which oddly enough on such occasions can function with particular lucidity – nevertheless loses all capacity to counteract the senses. It becomes unresponsive and impotent, and the resulting dichotomy only heightens the fearful agony of suspense. It seems to me that something similar must be experienced by those who suffer from necrophobia. But on the occasion in question the vagueness of the apprehension merely served to intensify my torment.

I remember I was standing with my back to the door, about to reach for my hat from the table, when I suddenly had the feeling that if I turned I would see Smith. First he would open the door slowly, hesitate on the threshold and glance around the room, then enter noiselessly with his head bowed, stand in front of me, fix his watery eyes on me and suddenly burst out laughing full in my face – a long, toothless, inaudible laugh which would set his whole body into prolonged agitation. This apparition was suddenly conjured up in my imagination with extraordinary clarity and precision; at the same time I was gripped by the absolute conviction that it would all inevitably happen, that it might indeed already be happening but that I hadn't been aware of it for the simple reason that I was standing with my back to the door which at that very instant was perhaps already opening. I spun round. To my intense horror I saw that the door was in fact slowly, soundlessly opening, just as I had imagined a moment before. I let out a cry. For a long time no one was visible – as though the door had opened by itself; then suddenly a strange creature appeared on the threshold; a pair of eyes, so far as I could make out in the darkness, were watching me keenly and warily. A cold shudder ran through me. To my utter astonishment I saw that it was a child, a girl – and had it been Smith himself, I doubt if he would have frightened me as much as the strange and unexpected appearance of that child in my room at such an hour, in such circumstances.

I have already mentioned that she opened the door softly and slowly, as though afraid to enter. Having come into view, she stopped as if struck dumb and looked at me for a long time in consternation; at last she gingerly took a couple of silent steps forwards and stopped in front of me, still without uttering a word. I looked at her more closely. She was about twelve or thirteen, small, thin and pale as though just over a severe illness. This only intensified the brightness of her large dark eyes. With her left hand she was clutching the folds of a ragged old shawl to her shivering chest against the evening cold. Her clothes were completely in tatters; her thick, black hair was unkempt and dishevelled. We stood there for about two minutes, eyeing each other intently.

"Where's Granddad?" she asked at last in a croaky, barely audible voice as though she had a sore throat or a pain in her chest.

All my mystical terror vanished in a trice at this question. Someone was asking after Smith – here suddenly was an unexpected clue.

"Your granddad? He's dead!" I blurted out, quite unprepared for her question, and regretted my answer at once. She remained standing for about a minute without changing her position, then suddenly began to shake violently all over as though she were about to have some dangerous nervous fit. I reached out to steady her, and to stop her from falling. A few minutes later I could clearly see that she felt better and was making a superhuman effort to conceal her agitation.

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry, you poor little girl! I'm so sorry, my dear child!" I said, "I spoke without thinking… You poor thing!… Who are you looking for? The old gentleman who lived here?"

It was obviously a great effort for her to speak, but she whispered "yes", looking at me apprehensively.

"The gentleman whose name was Smith? Is that right?"

"Y-yes!"

"It was him… well yes, he was the one who died… But don't you worry, my pet. Why didn't you come before? Where have you come from now? His funeral was yesterday. He died suddenly, unexpectedly… So you're his granddaughter, are you?"

The girl did not reply to my hurried, disjointed questions. Without saying anything she turned her back on me and slowly started to leave. I was so taken aback that I made no attempt to stop her, or question her any further. She halted once more on the threshold and, half-turning towards me, asked:

"Is Azorka dead too?"

"Yes, Azorka's dead too," I replied – and her question struck me as odd. It was as if in her mind Azorka must have died at the same time as the old man. After I had finished, the girl left the room silently, shutting the door carefully behind her.

After about a minute I ran out after her, bitterly regretting that I had let her leave like that! She had gone out so quietly that I hadn't heard her open the outer door to the landing. She wouldn't have had time to reach the bottom of the stairs yet, I thought, and stopped to listen in the

hallway. But all was silent, and there was no sound of footsteps. Only a door banged somewhere on the ground floor – after that all was quiet again.

I hurried down the stairs. From the doorway of my room on the fourth floor there was a spiral staircase to the third; from the third to the ground floor was a straight flight. It was a dirty, dismal, perpetually dark stairway with small apartments leading off it, typical of large rambling lodging houses. Feeling my way down to the third floor I stopped short, and suddenly I had the overwhelming feeling that there was someone there on the landing, hiding from me. I began to grope about; the girl was there all right. She was crouching in a corner with her face to the wall, sobbing softly, almost inaudibly.

"Listen, what are you afraid of?" I began. "I frightened you, didn't I? I'm sorry. Your granddad spoke of you when he was dying. In fact, his last words were about you… I've got some books of his. They're probably yours. What's your name? Where do you live? He said it was on Sixth Lane…"

But I didn't finish. She cried out, perhaps because she was afraid that I might know where she lived, pushed me aside with a thin, bony hand and rushed down the stairs. I dashed after her. I could still hear her footsteps resounding on the lower flight. Suddenly the sound ceased… By the time I ran out into the street, she had gone. And when I had run as far as Voznesensky Prospect, I realized that all my attempts to find her would be in vain. She had vanished. She had probably hidden herself from me somewhere as she ran down the stairs, I thought to myself.

11

NO SOONER HAD I STEPPED OUT onto the muddy, wet pavement of Voznesensky Prospect than I ran into someone walking along in a hurry, his head bowed, apparently deep in thought. To my great astonishment it was Ikhmenev. This was an evening of unexpected encounters for me. I knew that he had been very poorly these past few days – and yet here he was, out of doors, and in such foul weather! Besides, he nearly always stayed in after dark and, ever since Natasha had left home – nearly six months before – had turned into a virtual recluse. Now he somehow seemed just a little too pleased to see me – it was as though he had at long last found a friend he could share his thoughts with; he shook me firmly by the hand and without asking me where I was going dragged me along with him. He was agitated, impatient and abrupt. Where on earth had he been? I wondered, but thought better of asking him. He had become terribly touchy, and would take offence at the most innocuous question or remark.

I surreptitiously had a good look at him. He looked sickly. He had grown very thin; his face bore a week's stubble. His hair, which was completely grey, protruded in disorderly tufts from underneath his crumpled hat and long strands of it lay on the collar of his shabby old overcoat. In the past I had noticed that he could be very absent-minded at times; for instance, he would forget that he was not alone in a room and start talking to himself and gesticulating. It was painful to see him in that state.

"Well, Vanya, well!" he said. "Where were you going? I just popped out, my boy – on business. How are you keeping?"

"What about yourself?" I replied. "I hear you've been ill recently, and yet here you are, braving the elements."

Ikhmenev made no reply, as though he hadn't heard me.

"How's Anna Andreyevna?"

"As well as could be… That's to say, not particularly well. Not her cheerful self at the moment… She was asking after you, wondering why you hadn't been to see us. But you were just on your way over to us, weren't you, Vanya?… Or not? Am I keeping you?… Perhaps you've got other business!" he suddenly said, looking at me mistrustfully and suspiciously. The wary old devil had become so sensitive and irritable that if I had replied that I wasn't on my way to see them, he'd certainly have taken umbrage and coldly turned his back on me. I took pains to assure him that I was indeed on my way to look in on Anna Andreyevna, even though I knew I'd be late for Natasha, or perhaps not get to her at all.

"Well, that's good," Ikhmenev said, completely reassured by my reply, "that's good…" and suddenly he fell silent, lost in thought halfway through the sentence.

"Yes, that's good," he repeated mechanically after a long pause, as though emerging from a deep reverie. "Hm… you see, the thing is this, Vanya, we've always regarded you as our own son. God didn't bless Anna Andreyevna and me with… a son… and sent you instead. That's the way I've always looked at it. My dear wife too… yes! And you've always been respectful and considerate to us, just like a dutiful son. May God bless you for it, Vanya, and we old ones also give you our blessing and our love… yes!"

His voice faltered. He paused for a few moments.

"Yes… you were saying? You haven't been ill, have you? Been a bit of a stranger to us, haven't you?"

I told him all about Smith, taking care to explain that, having been preoccupied with his affairs, I had to catch up with my own, and added that I'd nearly became ill myself, and that what with one thing and another, it was altogether too far to visit them on Vasìlevsky Island, where they lived at the time. I nearly let the cat out of the bag by admitting that I had nevertheless managed to go and see Natasha, but stopped myself just in time.

Smith's story intrigued him very much. He became more attentive. On learning that my new room was damp and perhaps even less desirable than the previous one, but still cost me six roubles a month, he became quite agitated. He had grown extremely short-tempered and intolerant of late. Only Anna Andreyevna seemed to be able to handle him in such moods, and then not always.

"Hm… that's what comes of all that literature of yours, Vanya!" he exclaimed almost angrily. "It's landed you up in an attic, it'll land you in the grave! And it's not as if I didn't tell you and warn you!… So what about B. – still churning out his criticisms, is he?"

"He died some time ago, of consumption. I must have told you about it, surely?"

"Died, hm… died, eh? Serves him right. Did he leave anything to his wife and children? Didn't you say he had a wife somewhere or other?… Why on earth do these people marry!"

"No, he left nothing," I replied.

"Well, there you are!" he exclaimed with passion, as if it concerned him closely and intimately, as though the deceased B. were his own brother. "Nothing! Nothing indeed! But you know, Vanya, I knew all along that's how he'd end up – even when, remember, you were always singing his praises. Left nothing, did he? A fine state of affairs! Hm… famous, is he? So *he* might have earned himself immortal fame for all I know, but fame isn't going to feed *you*, is it? Even then I could see it all coming to you too, Vanya, my boy. I praised you all right, but deep down I could see it all coming. So B.'s dead! Small wonder! Isn't life wonderful… just look at that; isn't that a sight for sore eyes!"

And with a broad, involuntary sweep of his arm he indicated to me the fog-shrouded vista of the street with its dim lights flickering feebly in the dank air; the shabby houses; the glistening paving stones; the sullen, angry, rain-soaked passers-by; the whole dismal scene under the pitch-black dome of the St Petersburg sky. We were entering St Isaac's Square; before us in the mist towered the monument to Nicholas I, illuminated from below by gas jets, and further on loomed the huge dark hulk of the Cathedral, barely distinguishable against the dreary background of the sky.

"You did say, Vanya, that he was a good, generous, sensitive man with a kind heart. Well, they're all the same, those kind-hearted, sensitive men of yours! All they know is how to beget orphans! Hm… And dying must have been such good fun for him, I suppose!… Haha! Why not just leave all this in exchange for Siberia if it came to it!… What's the matter, young lady?" he asked suddenly, spotting a child close by begging for alms.

It was a stunted, emaciated girl of about seven or eight, no more, dressed in filthy rags; the shoes she wore on her tiny stockingless feet were full of holes. She was making every effort to wrap her shivering little body in a tattered old semblance of a frock which was much too small for her. Her drawn, pale, sickly face was turned towards us as she gazed up in shy silence and held out a shaking hand in a manner that anticipated a rebuff. At the sight of her Ikhmenev shook all over, and swung around towards her so abruptly that he startled her. She shuddered and recoiled.

"What, what's the matter, little girl?" he exclaimed. "What is it? Do you want something? Yes? Here you are, here… take it, here you are!"

In complete turmoil and overcome with agitation, he hurriedly began to fumble in his pocket and produced two or three silver coins. But it seemed to him not enough; he reached for his wallet, and having taken out a rouble note – all the money there was in it – he put it in the little beggar girl's hand.

"May the Good Lord protect you, my little one… you poor little mite! May God's angel be with you!"

And with a trembling hand he made the sign of the cross over her several times, but suddenly noticing that I was there to see it all, frowned and walked off with rapid strides.

"You know, Vanya, I can't bear to see that sort of thing," he resumed after quite a long, awkward pause. "Tiny innocent creatures shivering in the cold on the streets… and all because of their cursed mothers and fathers. Though what mother would send a child to such horrors unless she were at her wits' end herself!… I wouldn't be surprised if she had some more waifs huddled in some corner, that one being just the oldest. The woman's probably ill herself, and… hm! Not of princely stock, her

children, that's for sure! Altogether too many children in this world, Vanya… not of princely stock! Hm!"

He paused uneasily for a moment.

"You see, Vanya, I promised my Anna Andreyevna," he began, stumbling over his words, "I promised her… that is, we agreed, Anna Andreyevna and I, to take in a little orphan and bring her up… some little girl in need, that is, some very young orphan – for us to bring up, do you follow? Otherwise it's a lonely life for us old ones all on our own, hm… the only thing is, you see, my Anna Andreyevna has gone off the idea. Couldn't you have a word with her? Don't say I asked you to, you understand, but coming from you, as it were… see if you could persuade her – do you follow me? I've been meaning to ask you this for quite some time now… to try and get her to change her mind. It's not something I find easy to talk about… still, that's by the by! Why would I need a little girl? I don't really – except as a comfort – to hear the sound of a child's voice around the house… To be perfectly honest, though, I'm only doing it for Anna Andreyevna, she'd die of boredom with only me for company. But I'm talking rubbish! Look here, Vanya, it's too far to walk. Let's take a cab. It's a long way. Anna Andreyevna must be getting tired waiting for us…"

It was half-past seven when we arrived at the Ikhmenevs'.

12

THE OLD COUPLE LOVED EACH OTHER very much. Their love and their long life together formed an indissoluble bond between them. Yet even in their happiest times Nikolai Sergeich had always been rather uncommunicative, sometimes even harsh with his Anna Andreyevna, especially in company. There is in some refined and sensitive natures a kind of stubbornness, an unwillingness – born of discretion – to talk about or demonstrate their feelings even to those they love most, not only in public but in private too – particularly in private. Only rarely will there be an emotional outpouring, and the longer it has been repressed, the more unrestrained and impetuous it will eventually be. This was what Ikhmenev had always been like with his Anna Andreyevna, even going back to his younger days. His love and respect for her knew no bounds; although she was simply a good woman, capable of nothing more than reciprocating his love, he disapproved intensely when, in her simplicity, she all too readily bared her soul to him. But after Natasha's departure, their relationship mellowed; they now realized to their chagrin that they had no one but each other left in the world. And though Nikolai Sergeich would every now and again be overcome with depression, neither of them could endure being away from the other, even if only for a couple of hours, without feelings of pain and sadness. As for Natasha, they had tacitly agreed not to talk about her as though she had never existed. Anna Andreyevna was afraid even to mention her in her husband's presence, which was no easy matter for her. In her heart she had forgiven Natasha long ago. The two

of us had somehow come to an understanding that every time I came round, I would bring her word of her beloved, unforgettable child.

Anna Andreyevna would become positively ill if there was no news for a long time, and whenever I brought her some, she would hang on my every word, question me with anxious curiosity, and unburden her heart when she heard my reports; one day when Natasha fell ill, she nearly died of fright and was almost ready to go and see the patient for herself. But that was an extreme case. At first she couldn't bring herself, even in front of me, to express her desire to see her daughter, and at the end of our heart-to-heart conversations, after she had pumped me for every detail, she would invariably and somewhat disingenuously point out that, even though she was interested in her daughter's future, Natasha had done a terrible wrong, for which she could never be forgiven. But all this was just pretence. There were occasions when Anna Andreyevna would become completely distraught, weep in my presence, call Natasha by the fondest of names, and complain bitterly of Nikolai Sergeich, and in his presence start dropping not-so-subtle subtle hints about people's pride and cold-heartedness, the fact that we are unable to forgive offences against us and that God will not forgive the unforgiving; but in his presence she never went further than that. On such occasions Ikhmenev would immediately bristle and either lapse into sullen silence or, quite unexpectedly, and usually in an embarrassingly pointed manner, try to change the conversation or, if all else failed, simply *go to his room*, leaving the two of us on our own, thereby giving Anna Andreyevna an opportunity to vent her grief in tears and lamentations. He also always used to go to his room in this way whenever I came, even before I had finished saying hello, clearly to give me time to tell Anna Andreyevna the latest news about Natasha. That is exactly what he did on this occasion.

"I'm drenched," he said to her as soon as he came in. "I think I'll go to my room, but you stay here, Vanya. You should hear what happened to him at his lodgings. Why don't you tell her all about it? I'll be back shortly…"

With that he hurried off, trying even not to look at us, as though resenting the fact that, as always, it was he who had brought us together. On such occasions, especially after he eventually rejoined us,

he would always be gruff and acrimonious, even intolerant, towards both Anna Andreyevna and me as though annoyed with himself for his softness and compliance.

"You see what he's like," Anna Andreyevna said, having lately abandoned all her reserve and stratagems with me. "He's always like that with me, and he knows perfectly well we can see through all his guiles. Why all this pretence with me! As if I were a stranger to him! He's the same with his daughter. Surely he could have forgiven her – perhaps he'd like to, God only knows. He cries in the night, I've heard him! But he *will* put a brave face on it. It's that stubborn pride of his… My dear Ivan Petrovich, hurry up and tell me now where did he go today?"

"Nikolai Sergeich? I've no idea. I was going to ask you myself."

"I was worried sick when he went out. He wasn't at all well, you know, and to have gone out in that weather, at that ungodly hour too! Well, I thought to myself, it must be something particularly important, but what could have been more important than the business we all know about? I kept turning it over in my mind – but do you think I could screw up the courage to ask him? Even now I'm afraid to ask him about anything. My God, I nearly fainted when I thought of them both. What if he had gone to see her, I thought – perhaps he had decided to forgive her? He had already found out everything, you know, he knows every last detail about her. I'm convinced he knows, but I can't think how. He was in such a state yesterday and today. But why don't you say something! Tell me, my dear, what else happened there! I've been waiting for you to come, like an angel of God. I thought you'd never come. Well, is that evil man going to desert our Natasha?"

I immediately told Anna Andreyevna everything I knew. I was always perfectly frank with her. I informed her that Natasha and Alyosha really seemed to be heading for a break-up – that this time it was more serious than any of their previous disagreements; that Natasha had sent me a note the day before, begging me to come and see her at nine that evening, which was why I hadn't been planning to see them at all that night; that it was Nikolai Sergeich who had asked me to come back with him. I was at pains to explain to her that the position was now absolutely critical; that Alyosha's father, in the two weeks since his

return from abroad, would brook no opposition, and had taken Alyosha firmly in hand; but most important of all that Alyosha himself seemed not only not indifferent to his fiancée but, rumour had it, even to be in love with her. I also added that Natasha's note was, as far as one could tell, written in great agitation, and that it said everything would be decided that evening – but as to what, there was no indication; puzzlingly it was dated the day before, although my meeting with her was fixed for that evening, even down to the hour – nine o'clock. And so I would definitely have to go, and soon.

"Go along, my dear, of course, if you must," Anna Andreyevna began to fuss. "He'll join us in a moment, you'll have a glass of tea before you go, won't you?… Oh, where's the samovar! Matryona! What have you done with the samovar, girl? She'll be the death of me, that girl will!… Well, have your tea, think of a likely excuse, and off you go. And make sure you come back tomorrow nice and early and tell me all about it. Heavens above! I hope to goodness nothing else has gone wrong! As if things weren't bad enough already! I'm sure Nikolai Sergeich has found out everything – my heart tells me he has. I get to know a lot through Matryona, and she gets it from Agasha – Agasha's the goddaughter of Marya Vasilyevna, who lives at the Prince's house – but you know all that yourself, don't you? Wasn't my Nikolai in a foul mood today! There I was minding my own business, and then all of a sudden he fairly flies at me, but a little later he seemed to be sorry and said we were short of money. As if he'd shout at me over money! In the afternoon, off he went for a nap. I peeped at him through a chink in the door, and there he was, bless him, on his knees in front of an icon, praying. When I saw that, my legs fairly gave way under me. He didn't have his tea or his nap, just picked up his hat and walked out. Five o'clock it was when he left. I didn't even dare ask where he was going – he'd have shouted at me. He's taken to shouting a lot recently, mainly at Matryona, but I come in for it too. And every time he does, my legs go numb and my heart sinks. It's all only words, I know, but it frightens me just the same. I prayed to God to make him see reason a whole hour after he left. Where's that note of hers? Let me see it now!"

I showed it to her. I knew that Anna Andreyevna hoped against hope for one thing only, that Alyosha, whom sometimes she called an evil

man, sometimes a silly heartless boy, would finally marry Natasha, and that his father, Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich, would not stand in the way. She even let slip as much to me, although on other occasions she expressed regret at what she had said and denied she had ever meant it. But she would never have dared to voice her hopes in Nikolai Sergeich's presence – even though she knew he suspected her of entertaining them – because every so often he would in an indirect way rebuke her. I imagined that if he thought there was any likelihood of such a marriage, he'd have immediately cursed Natasha and torn her from his heart for ever.

We all thought so at the time. Ikhmenev looked forward to his daughter's return with all his heart, but he expected her to come back alone and contrite, having cast out all memory of Alyosha from her heart. That was his sole condition for pardon, not articulated in so many words, but for all that plainly written on his face and not open to debate.

"He's spineless, he's a spineless brat, spineless and cruel, I always said so," Anna Andreyevna began again. "They didn't know how to bring him up either, and what a ne'er-do-well he's turned out to be! And dear God, look what he rejects her for! What will become of her, the poor darling? I can't imagine what it is he's found in this new one!"

"I've heard, Anna Andreyevna," I answered, "that this fiancée of his is a charming girl, and even Natalya Nikolayevna said as much – "

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear!" Anna Andreyevna struck in. "'Charming girl' indeed! You scribblers are all the same, anything's charming provided it's in petticoats. If Natasha has a good word for the girl, that's just her generous nature. She has no idea how to handle him and lets him get away with murder, and she's the one that suffers. The number of times he's been unfaithful to her! Stony-hearted monsters, all of them! Ivan Petrovich, I can't tell you the torment I go through. Everyone is blinded by his pride. If only my Nikolai Sergeich could swallow his, there'd be nothing to stop him forgiving my angel and bringing her home. I'd fold her in my arms and feast my eyes on her! Has she got thinner?"

"She has, Anna Andreyevna."

"My angel! Listen, Ivan Petrovich, I'm at my wits' end! I've wept all night tonight and all day… but never mind that! I'll tell you all about it later! The number of times I've tried to persuade him to forgive her – never to his face mind, always in a roundabout, crafty sort of way. But my heart sank every time… What if he got really angry, I thought, and cursed her for ever! To be honest, I've not heard any cursing from him so far… but I can't help feeling he might. What would happen then? Father's curse – God's wrath. So every passing day I live in fear and trepidation. As for you, Ivan Petrovich, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You grew up in this house and were treated like one of the family, and all you can say is 'charming girl'! You should have heard what Marya Vasilyevna had to say. (I must confess, I invited her for coffee once when my Nikolai Sergeich was away on business for the whole morning.) She told me the whole story. Alyosha's father, the Prince, lives in sin with his Countess. They say she has been going on at him for some time now to marry her, but he's always managed to talk himself out of it. But this Countess, even in her husband's lifetime, had a reputation. No sooner had her husband, a wine dealer by trade, died than off she dashed abroad. She collected Italians, Frenchmen, barons, the lot. That's where she picked up Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich Valkovsky too. Meanwhile her stepdaughter, her first husband's, the wine dealer's daughter, was growing up fast. The Countess had gone through her own money, by which time Katerina Fyodorovna had matured, and so had the two million which her father, the dealer, had invested for her. They say she's worth three now. The Prince's eyes immediately lit up – marry off Alyosha to her! (No flies on him! The opportunity was too good to miss!) And the Count, the high-and-mighty courtier, the Prince's relative, you remember him, he's also in favour of the plan – after all, three million isn't to be sneezed at. 'Yes,' he says, 'why don't you have a word with the Countess?' – which the Prince duly did. The Countess was up in arms – kicked up a dreadful fuss. She's totally shameless, they say, a real harpy! Lots of people here, never mind abroad, won't receive her. 'No,' she says, 'we two will get married, my Prince, but not Alyosha and my stepdaughter!'* It so happens that this young girl thinks the world of her stepmother, worships her and obeys her in everything. She's as gentle as a lamb they

say, with the heart of an angel! But the Prince, seeing through all this, says, 'Don't you worry, Countess. You've spent your pile and you're hopelessly in debt. But let your stepdaughter marry Alyosha, they're birds of a feather – one can't say boo to a goose, the other's a simple Simon. We'll take them in hand and look after them – that way the money will be yours for the taking. As for marrying me,' he says, 'what for?' Cunning devil! A regular Mason! Six months ago the Countess couldn't decide what to do, but now the two of them have gone off to Warsaw and they're supposed to have struck a deal there. So I've heard, anyway. Marya Vasilyevna told me the whole sordid story, every detail, and she herself heard it from someone you can trust. Now you see what's involved, money, millions – never mind 'charming girl'!"

Anna Andreyevna's story gave me food for thought. It tallied perfectly with what I had recently heard from Alyosha. When he had spoken about all this, he boasted that he would never marry for money. But Katerina Fyodorovna had bowled him over and he had become infatuated with her. I also heard from Alyosha that his father was perhaps going to get married himself, though he denied the rumour so as not to annoy the Countess before time. I have already said that Alyosha loved his father very much, admired him, was proud of him, and believed in him as though he were an oracle.

"She's hardly what you might call a Countess herself, that charmer of yours, you know," Anna Andreyevna continued, still incensed at my having complimented the young prince's future bride. "Natasha would have made a much better match for him. The girl's just a trader's daughter, whereas Natasha's from an old noble line, a well-born young lady. Yesterday Nikolai Sergeich – I quite forgot to tell you – opened his box (the iron one, have you seen it?) and spent the whole evening sitting opposite me going through our family records. He was so engrossed! I was knitting a sock at the time, I didn't dare look at him. So when he saw that I wasn't going to say anything, he lost his temper, called me over and spent the rest of the evening explaining our family tree to me. It's quite true that our lineage – that is, the Ikhmenevs' – goes back to the days of Ivan the Terrible, and my branch of the family on the Shumilov side was already famous in the seventeenth century – we've documents to prove it, and it's mentioned in Karamzin.* So there

you are, my dear sir, it's obvious we're just as good as anybody else in this respect. When my Nikolai Sergeich started explaining it all to me, I began to see what was on his mind. He's bitter that Natasha's been slighted. It's only money that has helped them get the better of us. Well, let that fiend – Pyotr Alexandrovich I mean – worry about money. Everybody knows him for what he is, a hard-hearted, grasping brute. They say he's joined the Jesuits in Warsaw on the quiet. Is that true?"

"It's a silly rumour," I replied, though I was struck by its persistence. The fact that Nikolai Sergeich had been going through his family records was intriguing. He had never boasted of his lineage before.

"Stony-hearted monsters!" Anna Andreyevna continued. "So how is she, my dear, is she unhappy, does she cry a lot? Oh dear, it's time you went to see her! Matryona, Matryona! I'll kill that girl!… They're not being cruel to her, are they? Do tell me, Vanya."

What could I say to her? Anna Andreyevna burst into tears. I asked her if there was anything else troubling her that she wanted to tell me about.

"Oh dear, misfortunes never come singly – it seems my cup has not yet been drained! Do you remember, my dear, I used to have a little medallion set in a gold frame, a keepsake, with a portrait of my darling Natasha as a little girl. She'd have been about eight then, my angel. Nikolai Sergeich and I had it done by a travelling artist. See, my dear, you seem to have forgotten all about it! He was a good artist, and portrayed her as a cupid. She had such lovely fair hair then, all in ringlets. He painted her in a muslin shift, with her body showing through – she was so lovely, you couldn't stop admiring her. I asked the artist to add on a pair of little wings, but he refused. Well then, my dear Vanya, after all the horrors we'd gone through, I took the medallion out of my jewellery box and wore it round my neck on a string next to my crucifix, but I was frightened that Nikolai Sergeich might see it. It was the time when he insisted that every last thing of hers had to be thrown out of the house or burnt, so that there'd be nothing left to remind us of her. But all I wanted was to have a look at her portrait every now and then. Many's the time I'd cry my heart out looking at it – I always felt better for it afterwards – or else, when I was on my own, I'd smother it in kisses as though it was her very self I was kissing. I'd

call her by all her pet names and bless her with the sign of the cross every night. I'd talk to her out loud when I was alone in my room, ask her a question and imagine she was answering me, and then ask her another question. Oh, my dear Vanya, I can hardly bring myself to tell you all this! I was so glad Nikolai Sergeich didn't suspect anything about the medallion – but when I felt for it yesterday morning, it was gone. All that was left was the string it had hung by – it must have frayed through – but no medallion. I nearly died. I started looking for it. I looked and looked and looked, everywhere – it had vanished without trace! Where could it have got to? It must be somewhere amongst the bedclothes, I thought. I turned everything over – nothing! If it had fallen off somewhere, perhaps somebody had picked it up – but who could have, except *him* or Matryona! Well, you can rule out Matryona, she's devoted to me heart and soul… (Matryona, how much longer are you going to be with that samovar?) Well, I thought, if he finds it, what shall I do? There I was, sitting comfortless, crying my heart out. As for Nikolai Sergeich, he was getting more and more affectionate with me, looking at me sadly, as though he knew what I was crying about, and felt sorry for me. And I couldn't help wondering to myself, how could he possibly know? Could he have found the medallion and thrown it out of the window? I wouldn't have put it past him, when he was in a temper. He'd thrown it out and now he was sorry he'd done it. I even went outside with Matryona and looked under the window – not a thing. It had vanished into thin air. I cried the whole night through. It was the first time I hadn't made the sign of the cross over her for the night. Dear oh dear, this is a bad sign, a bad sign indeed, my Ivan Petrovich, it bodes no good. It's two days now I haven't been able to stop crying. I've been waiting for you to come, my dear, like an angel of God, hoping to unburden my soul…"

And the good lady began to cry bitterly.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot to mention it!" she resumed suddenly, glad to have remembered. "Have you heard anything from him about an orphan girl?"

"I have, Anna Andreyevna. It seems that you've both made up your mind to take in a poor orphan girl and bring her up. Is that so?"

"Never in my life, it never even entered my mind! I don't want any orphan girls! She'd only remind me of our bitter lot, our misfortune. I don't want anyone except Natasha. I've had one daughter, and there'll be no other. But my dear, where did he get this orphan-girl idea from? What do you think, Ivan Petrovich? Was it perhaps to comfort me, seeing me crying, or to blot out all memory of his own daughter and transfer his affections to another child? What did he say to you about me on the way here? How did he strike you? Gloomy? Angry? Sh! He's coming! Later, my dear, you'll tell me the rest later!… Don't forget to look in tomorrow…"

13

IKHMENEV CAME INTO THE ROOM. He looked at us with uneasy curiosity, frowned and went to the table.

"Still no samovar?" he asked. "Does it really take so long to bring it?"

"It's coming, dearest, it's coming. Well, here we are at last," Anna Andreyevna began to fuss.

As soon as Matryona saw Nikolai Sergeich, she appeared with the samovar as though she had been waiting to bring it in. She was an experienced, hard-working and devoted old soul, but the most wilful, grumpy person you could ever wish to meet – stubborn and obdurate. She was afraid of Nikolai Sergeich, and always careful what she said in his presence. With Anna Andreyevna on the other hand she indulged herself to the full, was impudent to her at every turn, and betrayed an unmistakable desire to bully her mistress, though she loved her and Natasha dearly for all that. I knew this Matryona from Ikhmenevka days.

"Hm… it's bad enough getting drenched, and when you come home they won't even make tea for you," Nikolai Sergeich muttered under his breath.

Anna Andreyevna immediately winked at me. He detested these surreptitious gestures, and even though he tried to avoid looking at us at that moment, it was clear from his expression that he knew perfectly well what Anna Andreyevna was winking about and that she was winking about him.

"I've been out on business, Vanya," he suddenly began. "Bad news. Did I tell you? The odds are against me. You see, I've no proof. I haven't got the right papers. My case won't stand up… Hm…"

He was referring to his lawsuit with the Prince, which was still dragging on; things did not bode at all well for Nikolai Sergeich. I was silent, not knowing what to say. He threw me a suspicious glance.

"So!…" he suddenly burst out, as though irritated by our silence. "The sooner the better. I'll not be made out to be a scoundrel even if I do have to pay up. My conscience is clear, whatever the verdict. At least it'll all be over. I'll be ruined, but free… I'll throw everything up and go to Siberia."

"Good Lord, whatever next! All that way!" Anna Andreyevna could not help exclaiming.

"What's the good of staying here?" he asked gruffly, as though enjoying the challenge.

"Well… we know people here…" Anna Andreyevna said, and looked wistfully at me.

"What people?" he cried, turning his blazing eyes from me to her and back again. "What people? Robbers, slanderers, traitors? There's plenty like that everywhere. Don't worry, we'll find them in Siberia too. And if you'd rather not come with me, please yourself, you can stay behind. I'll not force anyone."

"Goodness me, Nikolai Sergeich! How do you imagine I'd survive without you!" poor Anna Andreyevna exclaimed. "I've no one but you in the whole…" she stuttered, fell silent and turned her terror-stricken eyes to me as though imploring me for help and protection. The old man was incensed and in a belligerent mood; it was no use contradicting him.

"Come now, Anna Andreyevna," I said. "It's not as bad in Siberia as people make out. If the worst came to the worst and you had to sell Ikhmenevka, Nikolai Sergeich's proposal might be the best solution after all. There's every opportunity to set yourself up in Siberia, and then…"

"At last a bit of sense, Vanya, from you if from no one else. That's precisely what I thought. I'll leave everything and go."

"Well, I never expected this!" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "Is that all you can say, Vanya? Ivan Petrovich, you're the last person I expected this from… We've shown you every kindness, and now you—"

"Ha ha ha! And what did you expect! What are we going to live on here? Have you thought about that? All the money's gone, we're down to our last kopeck! Unless you'd like me to go and ask Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich for forgiveness?"

At this mention of the Prince, Anna Andreyevna began to shake with fear – the teaspoon she was holding began a merry jingle against the saucer.

"No, seriously," Nikolai Sergeich pressed his point home, working himself up into a stubborn, vicious ecstasy, "what do you think, Vanya, perhaps I really ought to go to see him? Why go to Siberia! I'll put on my best bib and tucker tomorrow, comb my hair and smarten myself up, Anna Andreyevna will get me a new shirt front – you've got to look your best going to see a toff like that! I'll buy a pair of gloves to add the finishing touch, and I'll be ready to meet His Excellency: 'Your Gracious Excellency, lord and master! I humbly beg your forgiveness, kindly let me have a crust of bread – I've a wife and small children to feed! …' Is that right, Anna Andreyevna? Is that what you want?"

"Dear husband… I want nothing! It was just a slip of the tongue, forgive me if I offended you, only please don't shout at me," Anna Andreyevna said, shaking more and more violently with fear.

I am sure that deep down Ikhmenev was in a state of turmoil and pain as he witnessed the tears and torment of his poor wife; I am sure it was more agonizing for him than for her – but he could not control himself. This is what happens sometimes even with the most kind-hearted of people, who are nevertheless weak-willed, and who, despite their kind-heartedness, are apt to get carried off into a state of ecstasy when unburdening themselves of their grief and anger, even at the expense of hurting someone innocent, more often than not someone who is dear to them. A woman, for example, may sometimes affect pain and misery even when she doesn't feel either. And there are many men who are very much like women in this respect – even men who are far from weak and

aren't in any way effeminate. Ikhmenev felt the need for a quarrel even if it meant suffering as a result.

I remember a suspicion flashed through my mind at that instant that he really had been up to something of the sort that Anna Andreyevna had suggested. Who knows, the Good Lord might have inspired him, he might actually have set off to see Natasha but had changed his mind on the way, or perhaps something had gone wrong, maybe his plans had suffered a setback – as was bound to happen – and there he was, home again, angry and beaten, embarrassed by his recent desires and emotions, eager to vent his anger on someone else for his own inadequacy, and choosing to do so on those he most suspected of harbouring desires and emotions similar to his own… Perhaps in his haste to forgive his daughter, he already anticipated the happiness and joy of his poor Anna Andreyevna, but when he saw his efforts had failed, she was of course the first to take the brunt of his displeasure.

He was moved, however, by her look of despondency as she stood before him trembling with fear. Perhaps ashamed of his own anger, he hesitated for a moment. None of us said a word. I tried not to look at him. But the respite was brief. Whatever the cost, the old man had to express what was within him, even if it took the form of a curse.

"You see, Vanya," he suddenly burst out again, "I regret what I said, I wish I hadn't spoken like that, but it's time to come to the point, without beating about the bush, as any honest man should… do you follow me, Vanya? I'm delighted you came to see us, and I want to say loud and clear in your presence, so that *others* may hear it too, that I've had enough of all this nonsense, all these tears, all this moaning and groaning. I shall never be able to put back what I've torn from my bleeding heart. Yes! I mean what I say. I'm talking about what happened six months ago, you understand, Vanya? I'm being open and direct so that you won't misunderstand me." He looked at me with bloodshot eyes, at the same time trying to avoid the terrified glances his wife was casting at him. "I repeat – it's utter nonsense; I won't stand for it!… What drives me mad is that *everybody* takes me for a fool and a scoundrel when they attribute such base and feeble sentiments to me… they think I'm going mad with grief… Rubbish! I've cast aside my old

feelings! I've consigned them to oblivion! I have no memories… none! None! None! And once again none!…"

With that he jumped to his feet and brought his fist down on the table with such force that all the cups rattled.

"Nikolai Sergeich! Don't you have any pity for Anna Andreyevna? Look what you're doing to her," I said, unable to control myself and looking at him with indignation. But that was just like a red rag to a bull.

"No, I don't!" he yelled, shaking and going pale, "I don't, because no one has any pity for me, either! I don't because broken as I am, people are plotting against me in my own house in favour of that dissolute daughter of mine, who deserves to be cursed and punished without mercy!…

"Nikolai Sergeich, don't curse her!… Do anything, anything you like, only don't curse your own daughter!" Anna Andreyevna pleaded.

"I will!" Ikhmenev yelled louder than ever, "because, wronged and disgraced as I am, I'm expected to go to that confounded creature and ask her forgiveness! Yes, yes, that's how it is! This is torture by tears, by sighs, by stupid hints, and I'm subjected to them day in day out in my own house! They want to wear me down… Look, take a look at this, Vanya," he added – and hurriedly, with shaking hands, he produced some papers from his side pocket, "here are some extracts from the case! It now transpires that I'm a thief, that I'm a liar, that I fleeced my own benefactor!… I've been defamed and disgraced because of her! Here, here you are, look, take a look!…"

And with that he began to pull various papers out of the pocket of his frock coat and throw them down on the table one after the other, impatiently fumbling amongst them for the one he wanted to show me – but all for nothing, he couldn't find it. In exasperation he jerked a whole handful of things out of his pocket – and suddenly something fell on the table with a distinct metallic clink… Anna Andreyevna let out a cry. It was the lost medallion.

I could scarcely believe my eyes. Blood rushed to the old man's cheeks and he shuddered. Anna Andreyevna stood there transfixed, her hands clasped, looking at him imploringly. Her features were radiant with joyous expectation. Her husband's red face, his embarrassment in front

of us all… yes, she had been right, now she understood how her medallion had disappeared!

She realized that he had found it and, overjoyed and perhaps trembling with excitement, had jealously hidden it from prying eyes so that in the privacy of his room, overflowing with love, he could feast his eyes on the features of his beloved child; that perhaps he had been locking himself away, just as she herself had done, to commune with his precious Natasha, invent questions for her, answer them himself, and at night, in mortified anguish and with muffled sobs, fondle and kiss the cherished image, and instead of heaping curses on her, ask for forgiveness and bless the daughter whom he had banished from his sight and damned in front of everybody.

"My beloved, so you do still love her after all!" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed, shedding all restraint in front of her harsh husband, who only a minute ago had been on the point of cursing her Natasha.

But the moment he heard her voice, his eyes flashed in mad rage. He snatched the medallion, flung it to the floor with all his might and began to stamp on it savagely.

"For ever I curse you, for ever!" he shouted hoarsely, gasping for breath. "For ever and ever!"

"Oh God!" Anna Andreyevna cried. "To do this to her, to her! My poor Natasha! her sweet little face… trample it underfoot! Underfoot!… Tyrant! Unfeeling, heartless monster!"

Hearing his wife wailing, the demented old man stopped in panic. Suddenly he snatched up the medallion from the floor and began to rush out of the room, but after a couple of paces fell to his knees, dug his hands into the settee in front of him, and let his head droop helplessly.

He sobbed like a child, like a woman. Sobs convulsed his breast as though they would tear it apart. At a stroke the fearsome old man had become as helpless as a child. Now he was no longer capable of cursing; now he was no longer embarrassed in front of any of us, and in a convulsive access of affection and in full view of all of us repeatedly kissed the image that only a minute ago he had been trampling underfoot. It seemed that all his tenderness, all his love for his daughter, so long bottled up inside him, was now striving to break out with irresistible force and shatter his whole being.

"Forgive her, forgive her!" Anna Andreyevna kept imploring and sobbing as she leant over him, clasping her arms around him. "Take her back into her parental home, my beloved, and God Himself will reward you at the Last Judgement for your humility and compassion!…"

"No, no! Never, never!" he brought out in a hoarse, breathless voice. "Never! Never!"

14

I ARRIVED AT NATASHA'S late in the evening, at ten. She was then living on the Fontanka, near Semyonovsky Bridge, on the third floor of a run-down rooming-house owned by a merchant named Kolotushkin. After leaving home she and Alyosha had at first lived on Liteyny Prospect on the second floor of a very fine apartment, fairly modest in size, but attractive and comfortable. However, the young prince's funds were soon exhausted. He hadn't become a music teacher, but had had to borrow money and soon run up what for him were huge debts. He spent his money on refurbishing the apartment and on presents for Natasha, who objected to his profligacy, scolded him and was sometimes even reduced to tears. Sensitive and emotionally perceptive, Alyosha would sometimes spend a whole week in delightful speculation as to what he might possibly buy her and how she would receive his present. He contrived to turn the whole exercise into a feast of self-indulgence as, bubbling over with enthusiasm, he shared his hopes and expectations with me, but would later be driven to despair by her tears and reprimands, so that as a result one could not help feeling sorry for him. Eventually the presents led to bitter exchanges and quarrels between them. In addition, Alyosha spent a lot of money behind Natasha's back; he fell under the influence of his companions and was unfaithful to her, having a string of various *demi-monde* Josephines and Minnas to whom he would regularly go. And yet despite all, he was still very much in love with Natasha. His love was of an agonized kind; he would often turn up at my place gloomy and out of sorts, saying he wasn't worth so much as a second glance from his Natasha, that he was crude and

insensitive, incapable of appreciating her and unworthy of her love. To a certain extent he was right; the two were most unequally matched; he felt he was a child compared with her, which was how she always regarded him too. With tears in his eyes he would confess to me of consorting with some Josephine or other, whilst at the same time imploring me not to tell Natasha about it; and when after all such revelations, timid and trembling, he would go to Natasha with me (it always had to be with me as he insisted that he was too scared to face her on his own after his misconduct, and that only I could give him support), she would only have to take one look at him to see what was going on. She was very jealous by nature, and for the life of me I do not understand how she always forgave him his lapses. It usually happened like this. Alyosha and I would enter the apartment, he would speak to her meekly and gaze tenderly into her eyes. She'd realize immediately what he had been up to, but would never let on, never mention it first, never question him; on the contrary, she would immediately be doubly affectionate to him, altogether more tender and cheerful – and not out of guile or premeditated cunning on her part. No, this wonderful creature seemed to derive endless delight from forgiveness and toleration, as though in the very act of forgiving she experienced some peculiar and subtle kind of pleasure. At that time it was only a question of casual encounters. Finding her mild and forgiving, Alyosha would no longer be able to contain himself, and would immediately, quite unsolicited, confess to everything – to salve his conscience and to "wipe the slate clean", as he put it. On being forgiven, he would go into ecstasies of delight, sometimes even weeping for joy and affection, and would hug and kiss her. He would cheer up and, with childish frankness, begin to recount his adventures with the current Josephine in great detail; he would banter, laugh, bless and praise Natasha to the skies, and the evening would end in happiness and merriment. When all his money ran out, he began to sell things. At Natasha's instigation a small, cheap apartment was found on the Fontanka. They continued to dispose of their possessions. Natasha even sold her dresses and began to look for work; when Alyosha found out about this, his despair knew no bounds. He cursed himself, screamed that he hated himself, but all the while did nothing to remedy the situation. Eventually their last

resources ran out, and their only remaining choice was work, however poorly paid.

At the outset, when they were still living together, Alyosha had had a serious quarrel with his father about this. The Prince's plans at the time – to marry off his son to Katerina Fyodorovna Filimonova, the Countess's stepdaughter – were still at an early stage, but he stuck to them tenaciously. He would take Alyosha to the bride intended for him, then, threatening and reasoning with him by turns, urge him to try and win her over. But it all came to nothing because of the Countess. Eventually even he began to turn a blind eye to his son's relationship with Natasha, prepared to let time take its course and, knowing Alyosha's frivolous and superficial character, hoping that his infatuation would soon pass. As to the possibility of Alyosha marrying Natasha, the Prince had until very recently almost stopped caring. The lovers themselves were happy to bide their time until a formal settlement had been reached with the Prince, and the whole situation had changed. Natasha, for her part, seemed reluctant to raise the subject. Alyosha had once inadvertently let slip to me that his father was in fact rather pleased with the way things were going – that he enjoyed seeing Ikhmenev's discomfiture in all this. Outwardly, however, he continued to express his displeasure towards his son, reduced his meagre allowance still further (he had always been extremely tight-fisted with him), and even threatened to stop it altogether. But soon, in relentless pursuit of his betrothal plan, he left St Petersburg to join his Countess in Poland, where she had gone on business. True, Alyosha was still too young to get married, but the prospective bride was too wealthy for his father to allow the opportunity to slip through his fingers. At last the Prince got his way. Rumour reached us that finally the betrothal was to go ahead. At the time I'm referring to the Prince had just returned to St Petersburg. He greeted his son in a friendly manner, but the latter's continued relationship with Natasha came as an unwelcome surprise to him. He began to hesitate, and his resolution wavered. He was strict and inflexible in his demand for a break-up, but he soon hit on a much better stratagem, and took Alyosha off to see the Countess. Her stepdaughter – still hardly more than a child – besides having the makings of a

striking beauty, had a kind heart, an open, unblemished character, a cheerful, affectionate disposition, and was clever into the bargain. The Prince calculated that the novelty of being with Natasha over the past six months might already have worn off, and that he would now regard his bride-to-be with quite different eyes from six months before. He was right on one count… Alyosha really did become infatuated. I may add that the Prince had all of a sudden become very friendly towards his son (though he still refused to give him money). Alyosha felt that his father's good-natured façade concealed a firm and unwavering determination, and he languished – not as much of course as he would have done if he hadn't been seeing Katerina Fyodorovna every day. I knew that it was five days since he had last been to see Natasha. On my way to her from the Ikhmenevs, I had the uneasy feeling that I knew what it was she wanted to tell me. As I drew nearer the house, I saw a light in her window. There had been a regular agreement between us that she would put a candle there every time she had an urgent need to see me, so that if I happened to be passing by – which I did nearly every evening – I should be able to tell that she wanted to see me. Lately she had often placed a candle in her window…

15

IFOUND NATASHA ON HER OWN. She was pacing slowly up and down the room, arms folded, deep in thought. The flame under the samovar, which had clearly been on the table some time now awaiting my arrival, was nearly extinguished. She smiled and held out her hand to me in silence. Her face had an unhealthy pallor. There was a look of suffering, tenderness and patience in her smile. Her blue eyes appeared to be larger, her hair thicker – all as a result of losing weight after her illness.

"I thought you'd never come," she said, as she shook my hand. "I was about to send Mavra over to see if you were ill again."

"No, I'm not. I was held up. I'll tell you all about it in a minute. But what's the matter, Natasha? What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened," she replied, looking surprised. "Should something have happened?"

"But you wrote… you wrote yesterday that I should come. You even specified the time, and asked me not to be late or early. You had never done that before."

"Ah, yes! I was expecting *him* to come yesterday."

"Well, hasn't he been yet?"

"No," she said after a pause. "That's why I thought, if he doesn't come, I'll have to talk it over with you."

"Were you expecting him tonight then?"

"No, I wasn't. Tonight he's *there*."

"So, Natasha, don't you expect him at all then?"

"Of course I do," she replied, looking at me with increased seriousness.

She clearly did not like the drift of my questions. We fell silent, and continued to walk up and down the room.

"I was looking forward to seeing you, Vanya," she began again with a smile, "and guess what I was doing? Walking up and down reciting a poem. Do you remember – the harness bell, the winter road? "Behold, on the table the samovar stands…" we used to read it together:

The storm is spent, the road is bright,
As countless eyes gaze down from above in the night…

And then:

Then the singer sings a joyful song
To the ringing of the bell,
'When, oh when will my beloved come
His head on my bosom to rest!
Where else such welcome he'll find? For scarce
Will dawn's rays the frost on the panes begin to tease,
The bubbling samovar to the table I'll bring,
And the fire in the stove will merrily crackle,
Casting a glow on my bed and the colourèd screen…'

"Isn't that beautiful! How moving those lines are, Vanya, what a vivid, fantastic picture they convey! Just the broad canvas with the pattern in bare outline only – embroider what you like on it. There are two worlds, the past and the present. The samovar, the bright curtain – how familiar it all is!… It could be any small family house in our provincial town. I can picture the house, the new timbers that haven't yet been weather-boarded…

And then the scene changes:

Still the ringing of the bell,
But the song's no longer joyful now.
'Where, oh where is my beloved gone?
And what if he did come
And lovingly embraced me?
Where now my bliss!
'Tis sparse, 'tis dark, 'tis dismal
And draughty in my room…
The solitary cherry tree outside
Through the frosted pane unseen,
For all I know, may long be dead.
Where now my bliss! The colours on the screen have faded.
Disconsolate I wander, to my folks I'll ne'er return.
There's no one more to chide me,
There's no one more to love…
There's no one more at home
Save my maid – a grumpy old soul…'*

"'Disconsolate I wander'… this 'disconsolate' rings so true! 'There's no one to chide me' – how much tenderness and feeling there, as well as painful memories – memories one has summoned up to brood over… My God, how beautiful it is! How true to life!"

She fell silent from a lump in her throat.

"Vanya, my dearest!" she said after a minute's pause, and then fell silent again, as though she had forgotten what she was about to say or had spoken without thinking, moved by some sudden impulse.

In the meantime we kept walking up and down the room. A lamp was burning in front of the icon. Of late Natasha had become increasingly pious, but did not like people to remark upon it.

"Is there a feast day tomorrow?" I asked. "Your lamp's lit."

"No, there isn't… well, Vanya, why don't you sit down, you must be tired. Would you like some tea? I'm sure you haven't had any yet."

"Let's sit down. I've had some."

"Where have you come from now?"

"From *their* place." That is how we always referred to her home.

"Their place? How did you manage to find the time? Did you just drop in? Did they ask you over?…"

She was showering me with questions. Her cheeks had gone even paler with anxiety. I told her in detail about my meeting with her father, my conversation with her mother, the incident with the medallion – I recounted everything in detail and with all the nuances. I concealed nothing from her. She listened avidly, hanging on my every word. Tears sparkled in her eyes. The incident with the medallion made a strong impression on her.

"Slow down, Vanya, slow down," she said, often interrupting my account, "don't leave anything out, I want to know everything, everything – you mustn't leave anything out!…"

I repeated everything for a second and then a third time, stopping frequently to satisfy her demand for details.

"And you really think he was coming to see me?"

"I don't know, Natasha; I can't say whether he was or he wasn't. There's no doubt he misses you and loves you – but whether he was coming to see you… that… that—"

"And he kissed the medallion?" she interrupted me. "What did he say when he kissed it?"

"Nothing coherent, just exclamations. He used the most tender words, begging you to come back…"

"Did he really?"

"Yes."

She began to cry softly.

"Poor things!" she said. "If he knows everything," she added after a pause, "that's hardly surprising. He knows an awful lot about Alyosha's father too."

"Natasha," I said gently, "let's go back to them…"

"When?" she asked, going pale and sitting up in her chair. She thought I was suggesting that we should go straight away.

"No, Vanya," she said, placing her hands on my shoulders and smiling sadly, "no, my dearest, you're always going on about the same thing, but… but it's better not to."

"Does that mean there'll never be an end to this awful rift!" I exclaimed, saddened. "Are you really so proud that you can't bring yourself to take the first step! It's up to you now, you must be the first to take it. Perhaps that's just what your father's waiting for – a chance to forgive you… He's your father after all, and you've offended him! Think of his pride – it's understandable, it's quite natural! You've got to do it. Why don't you try it and see, he'll forgive you completely."

"Completely! That's impossible. And you don't have to keep reproaching me, Vanya. I've thought about it day and night. There hasn't been a single day since I left them when I haven't thought about it. And the number of times you and I have talked about it! Surely you realize yourself that it's impossible!"

"Why don't you try?"

"No, my dearest, I'm afraid it can't be done. Even if I did try, I'd only turn him against me even more. You can't bring back the past, and shall I tell you what in particular? Those happy childhood days that I spent together with them. Even if Father forgave me, he'd hardly recognize me now. The person he loved was a little girl, he loved the child in me. He admired my childish simplicity. To show his affection he'd stroke my head just as he used to when I was a seven-year-old sitting on his knee, singing nursery rhymes to him. From my earliest childhood up to the day I left, he always came to my bedside to make the sign of the cross over me for the night. A month before that sad day, he secretly bought me a pair of ear-rings – I found out about it – and he had been as happy as a king imagining how pleased I'd be to get the present, and was terribly annoyed with everybody, especially me, when he discovered that I already knew about it. Three days before I left, he noticed I was very sad, and immediately he too grew sad and was almost ill, and – guess what? – to cheer me up, he decided to get tickets to the theatre!… He honestly thought that would cure me! I'm telling you, he knew and loved me as a little girl – he didn't want to know that one day I'd be a woman… It never even entered his head. If I were to return home now, he wouldn't recognize me. Even if he forgave me, he wouldn't know what to make of me! I'm no longer the same – certainly not a child after all I've been through. Even if I lived up to his expectations, he'd still be pining for the happiness of the past, regretting

that I'm not at all what I used to be, the child he loved. And the past always seems so much rosier than it really was! How painful it is to remember! The past is so good, Vanya!" she exclaimed, completely carried away and interrupting her own train of thought with this exclamation which burst from her heart like a cry of pain.

"All this is true, Natasha," I said. "And that means he's got to get to know you again and start loving you just as he used to. But the main thing is to get to know you. Yes, and he will. Do you really think he's incapable of getting to know and understand you, a man with his heart!"

"Oh, Vanya, don't be so unfair! Anyway, what's so special about me that needs understanding? That's not what I was talking about. You see, a father's love too is jealous. He's hurt that all this business with Alyosha started, and came to a head, without him knowing anything – that he didn't see it, that he missed it. He knows that he didn't have the slightest idea of what was coming, and now he's putting all the unfortunate consequences of our love and my running away down to my "ingratitude" and secretiveness. I didn't turn to him at the beginning – I didn't pour my heart out to him at the very beginning of my love for Alyosha. Quite the reverse – I bottled everything up inside me, I avoided him and, I assure you Vanya, that is more hurtful, more offensive to him deep down than the actual consequences of our love – the fact that I left them and devoted myself totally to my lover. Let's suppose he were to receive me back with a warm, affectionate, fatherly welcome, the seeds of resentment would remain all the same. Two or three days later there'd be bitter words, misunderstandings, recriminations. Besides, he wouldn't forgive me without conditions. Supposing I were to tell him – tell him the truth from the bottom of my heart that I understand how much I've wronged him, how guilty I am before him?… And however much it'd hurt me that he wouldn't appreciate what all this *happiness* with Alyosha had cost me, what suffering I've had to go through, I'd stifle my pain, I'd put up with everything – but even that wouldn't be enough for him. He'd demand an impossible price from me. He'd demand that I renounce my past, renounce Alyosha and my love for him, and repent… He'd want the impossible – he'd want to turn the clock back and wipe out the last six months of our life. But I

shan't renounce anyone, and I can't repent… That's just the way it is, that's how things have turned out… No Vanya, I can't, not now. The time hasn't come yet."

"When will it come?"

"I don't know… Somehow we've got to suffer our way through to our future happiness, purchase it by new ordeals. Suffering purifies everything… Oh Vanya, there's so much pain in life!"

I said nothing and continued to look at her with concern.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Alyosha – I beg your pardon – *Vanya*?" she said, smiling at the slip of the tongue.

"I'm looking at the way you're smiling now, Natasha. Where did you pick it up? You didn't smile like that before."

"What is there about my smile?"

"The childish innocence you used to have, that's still there, true enough… But when you smile, it's as if you had a pain deep in your heart at the same time. Look, you've lost weight, Natasha, but your hair seems to have grown thicker… What's this dress you've got on? Did you have it made when you were still at home?"

"You love me very much Vanya, don't you!" she replied, looking at me affectionately. "Well, what about you, what are you doing now? How are you getting on?"

"Just as ever. I'm still writing my novel. It's hard going though. I'm struggling. The inspiration's dried up. I suppose I could cobble something together, and it might even turn out reasonably entertaining, but it would be a shame to spoil a good idea. This one is one of my favourites. But it's got to be delivered urgently to a journal, there's a deadline. I've even been thinking of scrapping the novel for a straightforward story, something light-hearted and graceful, with no gloomy overtones… it goes without saying… Everyone must be happy and make merry!…"

"You work so hard, you poor thing! What about Smith?"

"Smith's dead."

"He hasn't been haunting you, has he? I'm being serious, Vanya: you're ill, your nerves are on edge – all those dreams of yours. I could see it all in your face when you were telling me about taking that room. Well, the room's damp – it's terrible, isn't it?"

"Yes! But something else happened tonight… No, on second thoughts, I'll tell you later."

However, she was no longer listening to me, but simply sitting there lost in thought.

"I just can't understand how I could have left them when I did. I was in a state of delirium," she said at last, looking at me in a way that indicated she did not expect a response.

If I had spoken to her again at that moment, I'm sure she wouldn't have heard me.

"Vanya," she said in a barely audible voice, "I asked you over for a reason."

"What is it?"

"We're parting."

"You *are* parting, or you *have* parted?"

"This life has got to come to an end. I asked you over to tell you everything, everything that's been building up inside me and that I've been concealing from you till now." That's how she always began with me, confiding her secret intentions to me, and then it nearly always turned out that I had heard all these secrets from her own lips before.

"Natasha, I've heard you say this a thousand times! Of course you two can't go on living together. Your relationship is altogether an odd one. There's nothing in common between you two. But… will you have the strength to leave him?"

"It used to be just intentions, Vanya. But now I've made up my mind once and for all. I love him to distraction, but it seems I'm his worst enemy. I'm destroying his future. He has to be set free. He can't marry me – he hasn't the strength of will to go against his father. Also, I don't want to tie him down. That's why I'm even glad he's fallen in love with the girl he is engaged to. That'll make it easier for him to part from me. I've got to do it! It's my duty… If I love him, I must sacrifice everything for him, I must prove to him how much I love him, it's a matter of duty! Don't you agree?"

"But surely you won't be able to persuade him."

"I'm not even going to try. I'd carry on just as before, even if he were to walk through the door this minute. But I must find a way to make it

easy for him to leave me and yet not suffer pangs of conscience. That's what's troubling me, Vanya. Help me. Can't you suggest something?"

"There's only one way," I said. "Stop loving him and fall in love with someone else. But I doubt if that would work. You know what he's like! Look, he hasn't been to see you for five days. Let's suppose he's left you for good. As soon as you write to him to say you're leaving him of your own accord, he'll be back here like a shot."

"Why is it you don't like him, Vanya?"

"I!"

"Yes, you, you! You're completely hostile to him in every way! You can't mention him without saying something malicious. I've noticed, thousands of times, your greatest pleasure is to denigrate and discredit him! Most of all denigrate him – tell me if I'm wrong!"

"And you've said that to me countless times. That's enough, Natasha. Let's change the subject."

"I'd like to move from here," she said again after a pause. "Don't be angry, Vanya…"

"Well, he'd only turn up at your new lodgings too. And I'm really not angry."

"Love is strong – it may be impossible for him to resist this time. Even if he were to come back to me, it would only be for a very short time. What do you think?"

"I've no idea, Natasha, everything is at sixes and sevens with him. He wants to have his cake and eat it, he wants to marry that girl and go on loving you."

"If I knew for certain he loved her, I'd have come to a decision… Vanya! Don't hide anything from me! Is there something you know but don't want to tell me?"

There was a questioning, worried look in her eyes.

"I know nothing, my dear Natasha, I swear. I've always been open with you. And it occurs to me that perhaps he isn't as much in love with the Countess's stepdaughter as we imagine. Perhaps it's just infatuation…"

"Do you think so, Vanya? God, if only I could be sure of that! Oh, how I wish I could see him this minute, just to look at him. I'd be able to tell everything by his face! But he's not here! He's not here!"

"Are you expecting him by any chance, Natasha?"

"No, he's with *her*. I know. I sent someone to find out. How I wish I could get a glimpse of her too… Listen Vanya, this may sound silly, but is it really impossible for me to see her, to meet her somewhere? What do you think?"

She was waiting expectantly to see what I would say.

"There's nothing to stop you having a look at her. The trouble is just having a look wouldn't be enough for you."

"Yes, it would; I'd be able to work out the rest from that. But something must have come over me. I keep walking up and down all on my own, always on my own – thinking to myself all the time, my thoughts in a whirl. It's so painful! I was just thinking, Vanya – would it be possible for *you* to get to know her? After all, the Countess praised your novel – you said so yourself once – and you sometimes go to Prince R***'s soirées, which she attends as well. Why don't you get yourself introduced to her? As a matter of fact, Alyosha could introduce you. You could then come back and tell me all about her."

"Natasha, my dear, let's talk about that later. More to the point, do you really think you'd be strong enough to leave him? Just look at yourself now – you're not exactly a picture of resolve!"

"I w-would be!" she replied almost inaudibly. "There's nothing I couldn't do for him! My life is his for the taking! But do you know, Vanya, I can't bear the thought that he's with her now, that he's forgotten me, that he's sitting next to her, talking and laughing – remember the way he used to sit here… That he's looking deep into her eyes – he always looks at people like that – and it will never occur to him that I might be here… with you."

She broke off and glanced at me in despair.

"Natasha, just now you were saying—"

"Why don't we, why don't we both just go our separate ways and never look back?" she interrupted me, her eyes glinting. "I'll give him my blessing. But it's unbearable, Vanya, to think that he'd be the first to forget me! Oh Vanya, what agony I'm going through! I'm completely lost – my mind tells me one thing, but reality is quite different! What's to become of me?"

"Natasha, calm yourself…"

"It's been five days already. Every hour, every minute… Even in my sleep – always him, just him! Vanya – let's go there! You take me!"

"Natasha!"

"No, let's go! I've been waiting for you, Vanya! I've been thinking of nothing else for the last three days. That was what I wrote to you about… You must take me there. I won't take no for an answer… I've been waiting for you… three days… There's a party there tonight… he's there… let's go!"

She seemed to be in a delirium. There was a commotion in the hall; Mavra appeared to be arguing with someone.

"Stay here, Natasha… Who's there?" I asked. "Listen!"

She listened with a puzzled smile and suddenly turned very pale.

"Good God! Who is it?…" she said in a barely audible voice.

She made as if to stop me, but I went out into the hall to join Mavra. Just as I expected! It was Alyosha. He was questioning Mavra, and she had been blocking his way.

"Look at him turning up like that!" she said in an authoritarian fashion. "Well? Where have you been all this time? Go on, be off with you! You won't sweet-talk your way past me! Go on, go away! Nothing to say for yourself, have you?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone! I'm going in!" Alyosha was saying, but he seemed somewhat nonplussed.

"Well, go on then! You really think you're something, don't you?"

"I'm going in! Ah! You're here too!" he said, catching sight of me. "How nice that you're here too! Well, here I am. You see, this is a little awkward…"

"Why don't you just come in?" I asked. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, I assure you, because by God, I'm not to blame. You think I'm to blame? You'll see, I'll explain everything in a minute… Natasha, may I come in?" he called out with feigned bravura, stopping in front of the closed door.

There was no reply from inside.

"What's going on?" he asked, perturbed.

"Nothing – she was there just now," I replied, "unless something…"

Alyosha opened the door carefully and cast a timid glance around the room. There was no one to be seen.

Suddenly he caught sight of her in the corner between the cupboard and the window. She was standing there as though in hiding, more dead than alive. To this day, every time I think of it, I can't help smiling. Alyosha went up to her, quietly and gingerly.

"Good evening, Natasha… Natasha, what's the matter?" he said shyly, looking at her in alarm.

"Oh… nothing!…" she replied, terribly embarrassed, as if it were she who was to blame. "Would you… like some tea?"

"Natasha, listen…" Alyosha said, completely nonplussed. "You're probably convinced that it's all my fault… But I'm not to blame, not at all! I'll explain everything."

"No need at all," Natasha whispered. "No, no, no need… better to give me your hand and… let that be the end of it… as always…" And she came out from the corner. Colour was returning to her cheeks.

Her eyes were lowered as if she was afraid to look at Alyosha.

"Oh my God!" Alyosha exclaimed ecstatically. "If it had been my fault, I probably wouldn't even have dared to look at her after this! Look at her, just look at her!" he cried, turning towards me. "There you are, she thinks it's all my fault, and blames me for everything. Everything speaks against me, all the evidence is against me! I've stayed away five days! Rumour has it that I'm at my fiancée's and – would you believe it? – she's ready to forgive me! She's already saying to me, 'Give me your hand and let that be the end of it!' Natasha, my darling, my angel, my angel! I'm not to blame, and you must believe that! I'm not to blame in the least! On the contrary! On the contrary!"

"But… But you're supposed to be *there* now… You've been invited *there…* How is it you're here? W-what time is it?…"

"Half-past ten! I *was* there… But I pretended to be ill and left, and… this is the first, the very first time in five days that I've been free, that I've been able to escape from them and come to see you, Natasha. To be honest, I could have come before, but I didn't, deliberately! And why? You'll find out in a moment. I'll explain. That's just why I came – to explain – only I swear, this time I'm not to blame for anything that concerns you! I repeat – I'm not to blame for anything!"

Natasha raised her head and looked at him… but he looked back at her with such candour, his face was so cheerful, so honest, so suffused

with joy, that it was impossible for her not to believe him. I expected they would cry out and fall into each other's arms, as had happened many times before during similar reconciliations. But Natasha, as though overwhelmed by happiness, lowered her head and suddenly… began to weep softly. At this, Alyosha was no longer able to restrain himself. He fell at her feet. He showered her hands, her feet with kisses, he seemed to be in ecstasy. Her legs were giving way under her. I brought a chair up to her, and she sat down.

Part Two

1

In a minute we were all killing ourselves with laughter.

"For goodness's sake, will you listen to me!" Alyosha's ringing voice rose above ours. "You think it's always the same with me… that I'll come up with some cock-and-bull story again… I tell you, I've got something really interesting for you. Will you both keep quiet for a moment!"

He was desperate to tell us something. We could see by his expression that he had some important news. But his deliberate air of self-importance and naive pride at being the bearer of such news immediately provoked Natasha to laughter. I couldn't help joining in. And the more annoyed he became, the more we laughed. In the end his vexation and childish despair brought us to such a pitch that were splitting our sides at the slightest pretext, like Gogol's Mr Midshipman* at the sight of a raised finger. Mavra had come out of the kitchen and was standing in the doorway watching us, highly indignant that Natasha hadn't given Alyosha the dressing-down she had been looking forward to for the past five days, and that instead we were all so merry together.

At last, seeing that our laughter was upsetting Alyosha, Natasha stopped laughing.

"What did you want to tell us?" she asked.

"Shall I bring the samovar or shan't I?" Mavra asked, interrupting Alyosha with scant regard for ceremony.

"Go away, Mavra, go away," he said, waving her away, wanting to be rid of her as quickly as possible. "I'm going to tell you everything

that's happened, everything that's happening now and everything that's going to happen, because I know it all. I can see, dear friends, you can't wait to know where I've been for the last five days – that's what I've been dying to tell you, if only you'd let me. Well, and this is the first thing – I've been deceiving you all along, Natasha, the whole of this time, I've been deceiving you for so long, and that's really the most important thing."

"Deceiving me?"

"Yes, deceiving you, for a whole month – I started even before my father arrived. Now the time has come to be completely frank. A month ago, when my father was still away, I quite unexpectedly got a really long letter from him, but I kept it secret from you both. He came straight to the point in his letter – and I tell you, the gravity of his tone really shocked me – he made it plain that my engagement was all settled, that my fiancée was nothing short of perfection, that of course I wasn't worthy of her, but that I must nevertheless marry her come what may. And therefore I should prepare myself, I should knock all my stupid notions out of my head, and so on, and so forth – well, you know what he means by stupid notions. So you see, it was this letter that I kept from you…"

"You did nothing of the sort!" Natasha interrupted, "fancy boasting about it! As a matter of fact, you told us all about it straight away. I remember you suddenly became so agreeable and affectionate, you kept close to me, as if you felt guilty about something, and bit by bit you told us everything that was in the letter."

"I couldn't have – I don't believe I could have told you the most important thing. Perhaps the two of you had guessed something – I wouldn't know about that – but you didn't hear it from me. I kept it quiet and suffered dreadfully."

"I remember, Alyosha," I added, looking at Natasha, "you kept turning to me for advice, and you told me everything bit by bit, in a roundabout way, of course."

"You told us everything! So please don't boast about it!" she confirmed. "What would you know about keeping a secret? As if you could deceive anyone! Even Mavra knew all about it. You knew, didn't you, Mavra?"

"Well, how could I not know!" Mavra responded, poking her head round the door. "You let it all out before three days were up. You don't know the first thing about deceit!"

"Oh dear, it's such a pain talking to you all! Natasha, you're doing all this out of spite! And you're wrong too, Mavra. I remember, I was out of my mind at the time. You remember, Mavra, don't you?"

"As if I could forget. And you're still out of your mind."

"No, no, I'm not talking about that. Surely you remember! We were hard up at the time, and you took my silver cigar case to the pawnbroker. But, the main thing, let me point this out to you, Mavra, you're forgetting yourself dreadfully. It's Natasha who's let you get above yourself. Well, let's suppose I did tell you everything there and then, bit by bit (it's coming back to me now). But it's the tone, the tone of the letter you didn't know, and it's the tone that is the most important thing about a letter. That's what I'm trying to say."

"So what about the tone then?" Natasha asked.

"Listen Natasha, you're asking me as if it were a joke. *It's not a joke!* I assure you this is very important. That tone took the wind out of me. My father had never spoken to me like that before. He'd rather have seen the world go up in smoke than have his will thwarted. That's the sort of tone it was!"

"All right, go on then, tell me – why did you need to keep it secret from me?"

"Oh Lord! So as not to worry you of course! I was hoping to settle everything myself. Well then, it was after I got the letter, as soon as my father returned, that my misery began. I was all set to answer him firmly, clearly and to the point, but somehow I couldn't manage it. And he wouldn't even ask any questions, the sly old devil! On the contrary, he just acted as if the whole thing had been settled, and there could be no room whatsoever for any argument or misunderstanding between us. Can you imagine? *No room whatsoever!* Such self-assurance! And then he started being so friendly, so kind towards me. I was simply astonished. He's so clever, Ivan Petrovich, if only you knew! He's read everything, he knows everything – you only have to look at him once and he knows all your thoughts as if they were his own. That's probably why they call him a Jesuit. Natasha doesn't like it when I praise him.

Don't be cross, Natasha! So there you are… oh, incidentally! He wouldn't give me any money at first, but this time, yesterday, he did. Natasha! My angel! Our poverty's over now! Here, look! Everything he held back from me as punishment these last six months, he made up for yesterday. Look how much! I haven't counted it yet. Mavra, just look how much money! No more pawning of spoons and cufflinks for us!"

He drew from his pocket a rather large amount of money, about fifteen hundred roubles in silver, and put it on the table. Mavra inspected it with satisfaction and commended Alyosha for it. Natasha pressed him to continue his story.

"Well, I thought, what was I to do?" Alyosha went on. "How could I go against him? That's to say, I swear to you both, if he'd been nasty to me, if he hadn't been so nice, I'd never have hesitated. I'd have told him to his face that I was a grown man and able to look after myself, and that was the end of the matter! And believe me, I'd have stood my ground. But as it was – what could I say to him? But don't blame me. I can see you don't seem too pleased, Natasha. Why are you looking at each other like that? I suppose you're thinking he twisted me round his little finger again and that I've no firmness. But I do have firmness, I do, and more than you think! And the proof is that, despite my situation, I immediately said to myself, 'You must tell your father everything, it's your duty to tell him everything,' and I spoke, and told him everything, and he heard me out."

"But what exactly did you tell him?" Natasha asked anxiously.

"That I wanted no other bride, that I already had one – you. Well, that is, I didn't actually tell him that in so many words, I haven't told him yet, but I have prepared him for it and I'll tell him tomorrow. I've made up my mind. First, I started to tell him that to marry for money was shameful and dishonourable, and for us to pretend we were some kind of aristocrats was simply silly (I don't mince words with him, it's man-to-man between us). Then I put it to him that I was just an ordinary chap, and in the end that was what mattered. That I was proud to be just like everyone else and didn't want to be singled out in any way… I spoke passionately, persuasively. I surprised myself. I convinced him in the end, even by his way of thinking… I put it to him, 'What sort of princes are we?' Only by heredity, but in essence, what's

princely about us? First, we're not particularly rich – and it's wealth that counts. The most important aristocrat these days is Rothschild. Secondly, no one's heard of us in higher social circles for ages. The last of us anyone has ever heard of was Uncle Semyon Valkovsky, but only in Moscow, and then only for having sold off his last three hundred serfs to cover his debts, and if his father hadn't bailed him out, his grandchildren would probably have been ploughing the land themselves like some other aristocrats I could mention. So we've got nothing to put on airs about. In a word, I told him everything that was boiling inside me – everything, frankly and straight from the shoulder. I even laid it on a bit here and there. He had nothing to say, he simply began to reproach me for having turned my back on Count Nainsky, and then said I should try to get into the good books of Princess K., my godmother, and that if I got on with Princess K., I'd be received everywhere and my career would be made, and so he went on and on. He was clearly hinting that since the two of us got together, Natasha, I'd neglected everyone, and that it was all in effect down to your influence. To be honest, though, he didn't actually mention you, and even seemed to be avoiding talking about you. We were both playing it clever, biding our time and trying to outwit each other – and rest assured, it's all going to turn out trumps."

"That's all very well, but how did it end? What did he decide? That's the important thing. You're such a chatterbox, Alyosha…"

"God only knows! I can't make head or tail of what he thinks. And I'm not a chatterbox, I'm talking sense. He didn't even try to decide anything – he just smiled at all my arguments with a sort of pitying smile. Of course I know it was humiliating, but I didn't mind. 'I quite agree with you,' he said, 'but let's call on Count Nainsky – only make sure you don't mention any of this there. I happen to understand you, but they won't.' I don't think he's particularly popular there himself. They're not happy about something. I just got the overall feeling that somehow Father isn't much liked in society at present. At first the Count received me very pompously, superciliously in fact; he seemed to forget that I'd grown up in his house, he had to think back to remember it, honestly! He's simply angry with me for my ingratitude, but really there was no ingratitude at all on my part. It was unbearably boring at

his house, so I just stopped going there. And he received my father terribly offhandedly, so offhandedly I wonder how he can still go there. It all made me really mad. Poor Father practically has to crawl before them. I realize it's all for my benefit, but the point is I just don't want any of it. Afterwards I wanted to tell my father how I felt about it, but resisted. What would have been the use? I wouldn't have changed his convictions, I'd have just upset him, and it's bad enough for him as it is. Well, I thought, I'd resort to cunning. I'd outsmart the lot of them. I'd oblige the Count to respect me – and what do you think? I got what I wanted straight away. In just a single day everything changed! Count Nainsky can't do enough for me now. And I managed all this myself, by my own cunning, so that Father was left simply speechless!…"

"Listen, Alyosha, you'd better stick to the point!" Natasha exclaimed impatiently. "I thought you were going to say something about us, but all you want to do is show off how you distinguished yourself at Count Nainsky's. Your Count is no concern of mine!"

"No concern of yours! Did you hear that, Ivan Petrovich – no concern of hers? But that's the most important thing of all. You'll see for yourself, Natasha. Everything will become clear in the end. Only let me get on with my story… I admit to you, Natasha, and to you too, Ivan Petrovich – I might as well be frank! – I'm not always very sensible. Well, there's no hiding it, there have been occasions when I've been downright foolish. But this time, I assure you, I was pretty smart… in fact… I'd even say clever, so much so that I thought you'd be pleased to know I'm not always… unintelligent."

"Look here, Alyosha, stop it! My dearest!…"

Natasha could not bear Alyosha to be thought of as unintelligent. How often had she sulked in silence when with scant ceremony I pointed out to Alyosha that he had committed some folly or other; it was a sore point with her. She could not bear Alyosha being humiliated, probably all the more because deep down she was only too aware of his shortcomings. But she never expressed her own opinion to him for fear of wounding his self-esteem. He was particularly sensitive in this regard and always guessed her innermost feelings. Natasha was aware of this and was troubled by it, so she would at once flatter him and make a fuss

of him. That is why his words now found a painful resonance in her heart…

"That'll do, Alyosha!" she added. "You're not like that at all, you're just rather thoughtless. Why do you have to put yourself down so?"

"Well, all right then. So, as I was saying – after my reception at the Count's, my father went so far as to lose his temper with me. Well, I thought, this won't do! We were on our way to the Princess's. I'd heard she had long been in her dotage, was deaf too, and crazy about lapdogs. She has a whole pack of them and adores them. In spite of all this she has a lot of influence in society, and even the high-and-mighty Count Nainsky dances attendance upon her. So on the way there I hatched a complete plan of action. And guess what it was based on? Why, on the fact that all dogs like me – yes, honestly! I've noticed it. Either I've got some sort of magnetism in me or it's because I really love animals. I don't know, but dogs just love me, and that's all there is to it! By the way, talking of magnetism, I didn't tell you, Natasha, did I? We were calling up spirits the other day, I was at a spiritualist's. It's really strange, Ivan Petrovich, I was quite amazed. I called up Julius Caesar."

"Good Lord, what did you want with Julius Caesar?" Natasha exclaimed, collapsing with laughter. "That's all we needed!"

"Well, why not?… You'd think I was some sort of… Why shouldn't I call up Julius Caesar? It's no skin off his nose… She's laughing at me!"

"It's all right, of course there's no harm done… oh my dearest! Well, what did Julius Caesar have to say to you?"

"He didn't say anything. I just held the pencil and the pencil moved by itself across the paper and wrote. They said it was Julius Caesar writing. I didn't believe it."

"And what did it say?"

"It said something like 'Dunk it',* as in Gogol… now do please stop laughing!

"What about the Princess?"

"Well, you keep interrupting me. We arrived at the Princess's and I started straight away by making it up to Mimi. That Mimi is the most wretched, obnoxious little animal you ever saw, obstinate and old, and she bites. The Princess absolutely dotes on her, she's the apple of her eye. I think they're roughly the same age. So I began to ply Mimi with

sweets, and within about ten minutes I'd managed to teach her to give me her paw, something no one had been able to teach her in her whole life. The Princess was simply over the moon, she practically wept for joy. 'Mimi! Mimi! Mimi can shake hands!' Someone arrived, 'Mimi's shaking hands! My godson taught her!' Count Nainsky came in, 'Mimi's shaking hands!' She was almost crying with emotion as she looked at me. She's the dearest old lady, I felt quite sorry for her. I wasn't going to let the opportunity slip, so I flattered her. She has a snuffbox with a portrait of herself as a bride, some sixty years ago. She happened to drop the snuffbox and I picked it up and said as if in all innocence, "*Quelle charmante peinture!** This is exquisite!" Then I had her in the palm of my hand. She went on about this, that and the other, where I'd studied, whom I visit, what glorious hair I had, and so on and so forth. I wasn't diffident either – I made her laugh. I told her a scandalous story I knew. She loves that sort of thing. She wagged her finger at me but was convulsed with laughter all the same. When I was leaving, she kissed me and gave me her blessing and demanded I come every day to entertain her. The Count shook my hand, his eyes oozing admiration. And my father, who's the kindest, sincerest man you could ever wish to meet – in a word, a perfect gentleman – was almost weeping with joy – you mightn't believe it – when the two of us arrived home. He hugged me, became confidential, mysteriously confidential, and started going on about career prospects, connections, money, marriages, much of it over my head. That's when he gave me the money. That was yesterday. I'm going to the Princess's again tomorrow, but father's really a thorough gentleman – don't misunderstand me, even if he does try to drag me away from you, Natasha, it's only because he's dazzled by Katya's millions, something you haven't got – and he wants the money, but only for my sake, and it's only out of ignorance he's unfair to you. And what father doesn't want happiness for his son? After all, it's not his fault he's used to reckoning happiness in terms of millions. They're all like that. If one looks at it from that point of view – as one must – he's perfectly right. I deliberately hurried straight to you, Natasha, to tell you this, because I know you're prejudiced against him and, of course, you've every right to be. I don't blame you…"

"So all that happened is that you and the Princess hit it off? Is that all your cunning amounts to?" Natasha asked.

"What do you mean? It's only the beginning… I only told you about the Princess because, you understand, it's through her I shall win my father round. But I haven't come to my main story yet."

"Well, get on with it then!"

"Something else happened to me today, something very strange, and I still haven't quite got over it," Alyosha went on. "You have to bear in mind that although as far as my father and the Countess are concerned our betrothal has been all arranged, there's been nothing official yet, so that even if we broke it all off right now, there'd be no scandal whatever. Count Nainsky alone knows, but he's considered one of the family and our benefactor. Besides, although in the last two weeks Katya and I have become very close, until tonight we hadn't spoken a word about our future, that is, about our wedding and… well, about love. Besides, we're supposed to ask the Princess K. for her permission first, because she can pull all sorts of strings and be Lady Bountiful. In society whatever she says goes – she has such connections… And they can't wait for me to establish myself and get on in society. But it's the Countess, Katya's stepmother, who's insisting on all these arrangements most of all. The thing is that, because of all her escapades abroad, the Princess may well refuse to receive her, and if the Princess won't, then the others probably won't either. So here's an opportunity – my engagement to Katya. And that's why the Countess, who originally was against the engagement, was terribly delighted at my success at the Princess's. But that's by the by – the most important thing is, I've known Katerina Fyodorovna since last year, but I was very immature then and couldn't understand a thing, so I never quite managed to see anything in her—"

"You were simply more in love with me then," Natasha interjected. "That's why you didn't see anything in her, whereas now—"

"Not a word more, Natasha!" Alyosha cried excitedly. "You're quite wrong and you insult me!… I'm not even going to answer that… Listen to me and you'll understand everything… Oh, if only you knew Katya! If only you knew what a tender, fine, sweet soul she is! But you'll find out soon enough. Just listen to the rest of the story! Two weeks ago

after they got back, when my father took me to see Katya, I started to observe her closely. I noticed she was observing me too. That really aroused my curiosity, quite apart from my intention of getting to know her better, which I'd meant to do ever since I got that letter from my father that so astonished me. I'm not going to say anything, I'm not going to praise her, except to say one thing – she's a shining exception to her whole circle. She's such an extraordinary character, such a strong and honest soul, so strong in her purity and honesty, you understand, that she makes me look like a child, a younger brother at most, even though she's only seventeen herself. Another thing I noticed, she has an air of sadness about her, it's as though she has a secret. She's not talkative and hardly says a word at home, as if she's in a state of shock… She seems to be turning something over in her mind. And she appears to be afraid of my father. She doesn't like her stepmother – that much I gathered. The Countess, for reasons best known to herself, makes out that her stepdaughter is terribly fond of her. It's all quite untrue. Katya simply does what she's told unquestioningly, and it seems as though the two have conspired about this. Four days ago, after observing her all that time, I decided to carry out my intention, and tonight I did. That was to tell Katya everything, confess all, get her on our side and put an end to the whole business at a stroke—"

"What? Tell her what, confess what?" Natasha asked apprehensively.

"Everything, the whole lot," Alyosha replied, "and I thank Almighty God for inspiring me with the idea, but listen, just listen! Four days ago I decided to stay away from you both and deal with the matter myself. If I'd been with you, I'd have shilly-shallied, I'd have listened to you and wouldn't have been able to pluck up my courage. On my own though, having put myself into a situation where I constantly had to remind myself that I had to resolve the matter, that I *must* put an end to it, I steeled myself and… I put an end to it! I resolved to come back to you with it all settled, and I *have* come back with it all settled."

"What, what happened? How did it go? Tell us!"

"It's very simple! I approached her directly, honestly and resolutely… But first I must tell you something else that happened before that, and which really astounded me. Before we set out, my father received a letter. I was about to go into his study, but I stopped at the door. He

didn't see me. He was so struck by the letter that he was talking to himself, exclaiming out loud and pacing up and down, quite beside himself. Then at last, with the letter still in his hands, he suddenly burst out laughing. I was quite nervous about entering the room, so I waited a moment and only then went in. My father was so pleased about something, so pleased that he started speaking to me quite strangely. Then he broke off and told me to get ready to leave at once, even though it was still very early. There was no one there at the Countess's; you were quite mistaken, Natasha, in thinking they were entertaining that night. You were misinformed…"

"Oh Alyosha, stick to the point, please! Just tell me exactly what you told Katya!"

"Luckily they left us alone together for two whole hours. I simply put it to her that though they wanted us to get engaged, marriage was out of the question for us, but that in my heart I was totally for her and that she alone could save me. Then I told her everything. Just fancy, she knew nothing of our situation, nothing about us, Natasha! If you could have seen how moved she was, even frightened at first. She turned pale. I told her all about us, that you left your home for me, that we're living together, that we're struggling now, that we're so afraid of everything and are now appealing to her (I spoke in your name too, Natasha) to side with us and inform her stepmother in no uncertain terms that she herself has no wish to be my wife – thereby offering us our only way out, our only hope. She listened with such interest, such sympathy. You should have seen the look in her eyes at that moment! It was as if her whole soul was in her eyes. She has such deep-blue eyes. She thanked me for trusting her, and promised to do all she could to help us. Then she started asking about you, and said she'd very much like to meet you. She asked me to tell you that she already loved you as a sister and wanted you to love her as a sister, and when she found out that I hadn't seen you for five days, she immediately started urging me to go to see you…"

Natasha was moved.

"And before telling me this you were going on about your successes with some deaf old princess! Oh Alyosha, you're impossible!" she cried,

gazing reproachfully at him. "Well, what about Katya? Was she happy, cheerful, when she said goodbye to you?"

"Yes, she was happy that she was able to do a noble deed, but she was crying. Because she too loves me, Natasha! She confessed that she was beginning to fall in love with me, that she doesn't meet any other men and that she took a fancy to me a while ago. She said that what struck her particularly about me was that despite the wiles and duplicity all around, I seemed to be sincere and honest. She stood up and said, "Well, God be with you, Alexei Petrovich. I rather thought…" But then she broke off, burst into tears and left the room. We decided she'd tell her stepmother tomorrow that she didn't want to marry me, and that tomorrow, come what may, I must tell my father everything and be absolutely firm and honest about it. She reproached me for not having told him before and said that a gentleman shouldn't be afraid of anything! She's so high-minded. She doesn't like my father either, she says he's sly and a money-grubber. I defended him but she would have none of it. If I don't get anywhere with my father tomorrow (and she's quite sure I won't), she has agreed that I should appeal to Princess K. for protection. Then none of them will dare go against us. We promised each other we'd be like brother and sister. Oh, if only you knew her story, how unhappy she is; she hates living with her stepmother and the whole situation she's in… She didn't tell me that in so many words, as if she were afraid of me too, but I put two and two together. Natasha, my darling! How she would admire you if she saw you! She has such a kind heart! She is so easy to be with! You two were made to be sisters and you must love each other. I've been thinking about it all the time. I'd really like to bring the two of you together, and then just stand back and admire the pair of you. Don't imagine anything wrong in this, my dearest Natasha. Just let me talk about her. To talk about her to you and about you to her is what I want most of all. You know that I love you more than anyone, more than her… You are everything to me!"

Natasha was looking at him in silence, affectionately and, somehow, sadly. His words seemed to caress and at the same time torment her.

"It's some time now, over two weeks, since I recognized Katya's true worth," he went on. "I was calling on them every night. And when I'd

get back home, I'd think and think about the two of you and compare you."

"And which of us came off best?" Natasha asked with a smile.

"Sometimes you, sometimes her. But you've always been the best. Whenever I talk to her on the other hand, I feel that I become somehow better, cleverer, more gentlemanly. But tomorrow, tomorrow it'll all be settled!"

"But don't you feel sorry for her? After all, she does love you, you couldn't help noticing that yourself, you said."

"Yes, I do feel sorry for her, Natasha! But we shall all three love one another, and then…"

"And then it's goodbye," Natasha said softly as if to herself. Alyosha looked at her in amazement.

But our conversation was suddenly interrupted in a most unexpected fashion. From the kitchen, which also served as an entrance hall, we heard a light bustle, as if someone had entered the house. A minute later Mavra opened the door and began to beckon Alyosha surreptitiously. We all turned towards her.

"There's someone asking for you, if you please," she said enigmatically.

"Who could be asking for me?" Alyosha said, looking at us in surprise. "I'll go and see."

In the kitchen stood his father's liveried servant. It transpired that on his way home, the Prince had stopped his carriage at Natasha's lodgings to enquire if Alyosha was there. Having announced this, the servant immediately withdrew.

"That's odd! He's never done that before," Alyosha said, regarding us in some confusion. "Whatever can it mean?"

Natasha was looking anxiously at him. Suddenly Mavra opened the door again.

"He's coming himself, the Prince." she said in a hurried whisper, and disappeared.

Natasha turned pale and stood up. Suddenly her eyes flashed. She stood leaning lightly on the table and in some agitation gazed at the door through which the uninvited guest would enter.

"Natasha, don't be afraid, you're with me! I won't let anyone insult you," Alyosha whispered, embarrassed but standing firm. The door opened and there stood Prince Valkovsky *in propria persona*.

2

HE SHOT A QUICK, SEARCHING GLANCE at us, from which one could not tell whether he had come as friend or foe. But let me describe in detail his outward appearance. That evening he made a great impression on me.

I had seen him before. He was a man of about forty-five, no more, with regular and very handsome features that changed according to circumstances; changed abruptly, completely, with unusual rapidity, going from the utmost amiability to total sullenness or discontent, as if some spring within him had suddenly been activated. The regular oval face, somewhat swarthy, the excellent teeth, the small, fairly thin, beautifully chiselled lips, the rather long straight nose, the high forehead which showed as yet no trace of wrinkles, the grey, fairly large eyes – all made him rather handsome, but nevertheless the face did not produce an agreeable impression. The face was off-putting precisely because its expression was unnatural, always affected, premeditated, contrived, leaving one with the distinct feeling that its true nature could never be divined. Looking into it more carefully, one began to suspect that under the everyday mask lurked something nasty, cunning and in the highest degree egotistical. One particularly couldn't help noticing his beautiful wide-open grey eyes. They alone seemed not to be entirely subject to his will. Try as he might to impart to them a gentle and friendly radiance, his gaze was ambivalent for there was always a cruel, mistrustful, searching and spiteful edge to it… He was fairly tall, elegantly built, on the wiry side, and looked much younger than his years. His soft, dark brown hair had barely begun to turn grey. His ears,

his hands and his feet were exquisitely formed. It was in every way a thoroughbred kind of handsomeness. He was dressed with refined elegance and freshness, rather on the youthful side, which however suited him well. He could have been Alyosha's elder brother. In any case one would in no way have taken him for the father of such a grown-up son.

He went straight up to Natasha and said, looking resolutely at her, "My calling on you at such an hour and unannounced is strange and contrary to all accepted rules of decorum, but I trust you'll believe me that I for one am fully aware of the eccentricity of my behaviour. Also, I realize who I'm dealing with. I know that you are magnanimous and understanding. Give me just ten minutes of your time and I hope you will appreciate my point and vindicate me."

He said all this politely but forcefully, and with an urgency that brooked no opposition.

"Why don't you take a seat?" Natasha said, still not quite recovered from her initial embarrassment and shock. He bowed slightly and sat down.

"First let me say a couple of words to him," he said, indicating his son. "Alyosha, no sooner had you left without waiting for me and without even bidding us goodbye than the Countess was informed that Katerina Fyodorovna was unwell. The Countess was about to rush over to see her, but Katerina Fyodorovna herself suddenly came into the room very upset and agitated. She told us outright that she couldn't be your wife. Then she said she was going into a nunnery, that you had asked her for help and had admitted that you were in love with Natalya Nikolayevna… Such an extraordinary admission from Katerina Fyodorovna, and at such a moment, was of course brought about by the most unusual nature of your conversation with her. She was almost beside herself. You can well understand how shocked and horrified I was. Driving past just now I noticed the light in your windows," he said, turning to Natasha. "Then a thought that I had not been able to shake off for ages overwhelmed me to such an extent that I could not resist my first impulse to call on you. Why did I do so? I'll tell you presently, but first, please don't be surprised if my explanation is a little blunt. It has all come about so suddenly…"

"I hope I'll be able to understand you correctly and… appreciate all you have to say," Natasha said hesitantly.

The Prince was scrutinizing her as though trying to fathom her out in one brief minute.

"I shall rely on your good sense," he went on, "and if I took the liberty of calling on you now, it was because I appreciate whom I am dealing with. I've known you a long time, notwithstanding the fact that I had once treated you so unfairly and had done you an injustice. Hear me out. You know there has been bad blood for a long time between your father and myself. I make no excuses. Perhaps I am more to blame than I realized up to now. But if so, then I myself have been deceived. I am mistrustful, and I admit it. I am inclined to suspect the worst rather than the best – an unfortunate trait, characteristic of a barren heart. But I am not one to hide my shortcomings. I believed all the slander, and when you left your parents, I shuddered for Alyosha. But I still did not know you then. The enquiries I've been making here and there have completely reassured me. I've been watching and studying you and have at last come to the conclusion that my suspicions were groundless. I learnt that you had quarrelled with your family, and I know too that your father is utterly opposed to your marrying my son. And the very fact that, having so much influence, not to say power, over Alyosha, you have so far not used that power to get him to marry you, that alone speaks extraordinarily well of you. All the same I freely admit that at the time I was determined to put every possible obstacle in the way of your marriage to my son. I know I am expressing myself unduly frankly, but, as I'm sure you will agree when you have heard me out, frankness on my part is what is called for most at this point. I left St Petersburg shortly after you left your home, but by then I had no worries about Alyosha. I was counting on your innate sense of pride. I knew that you yourself would not want the wedding to take place until our family dispute was settled, would not want a rift between Alyosha and myself, because I'd never have forgiven him for marrying you, and that neither would you want it be said that you tried to catch a prince for husband so as to be connected with our family. On the contrary, you seemed to ignore us and were perhaps waiting for me to come and ask you to do us the honour of giving my son your hand in marriage. All the same, I

stubbornly continued to maintain an unfriendly stance towards you. I'm not going to start making excuses, but neither shall I hide my reasons from you. Here they are: you have neither social standing nor wealth. Though I have some property, we need more. Our family is in decline. We need connections and money. Although Countess Zinaida Fyodorovna's stepdaughter has no connections, she is very wealthy. If we'd delayed, suitors would have turned up and snatched the bride from us. Such opportunity was not to be missed – therefore, in spite of Alyosha's tender age, I decided to arrange a betrothal. As you can see, I'm being perfectly honest. You may regard with scorn a father who, by his own admission, out of greed and prejudice urged his son to do something discreditable, because to desert a generous-hearted girl who has sacrificed everything for him and whom he has wronged – that is discreditable. But I offer no excuses. The second reason for my son's proposed marriage to Countess Zinaida Fyodorovna's stepdaughter is that the girl is eminently worthy of love and respect. She is beautiful, exceptionally well brought up, has an excellent character and is very intelligent, although in many respects still rather immature for her age. Alyosha lacks strength of character, he is flighty, extremely imprudent and, at the age of twenty-two, still a complete child; while his one virtue, his kind-heartedness, when combined with his shortcomings, is a distinct liability. I've noticed for some time now that my influence over him has been waning, that impulsiveness and the distractions of youth have been dominating and even supplanting certain intrinsic duties. Maybe I am too fond of him, but I am becoming increasingly convinced that I have outlived my role as his sole mentor, whereas he needs to be under someone who could constantly exert a benign influence over him. He is by nature weak, compliant and loving, preferring to love and submit rather than command. That's how he'll be all his life. You can imagine how glad I was to find in Katerina Fyodorovna the ideal girl I would have wanted as a wife for my son. But I was overtaken by events. He had already come under another unyielding influence, namely… yours. Since returning to St Petersburg a month ago, I've been keeping a close eye on him and have been surprised to observe a decided change for the better. The irresponsibility and childishness are about the same, but certain noble

tendencies seem to have gained the upper hand in him. He is no longer interested in just idle pastimes, but in that which is elevated, noble and honourable. His ideas are strange, unstable, sometimes absurd, but – and this is the basis of everything – his feelings, his desires, his impulses are nobler, and all this improvement is undoubtedly due to you. You have made a new man of him. I confess the idea did flash through my mind at the time that you more than anyone else might make him happy. But I banished the thought. I did not want to think along those lines. I had to split the two of you at all costs. I began to work on it, and thought I had succeeded. Just an hour ago I still thought victory was within my reach. But what happened at the Countess's has upset all my calculations in a trice – and if I had to name one thing that struck me above all, it was an unaccustomed seriousness in Alyosha, a steadfastness of his devotion to you, the strength and vitality of that devotion. I repeat, you have made a completely new man of him. It suddenly dawned on me that the change in him was even more far-reaching than I had first thought. Today he unexpectedly exhibited signs of an intelligence I would not have hitherto credited him with, and along with it he betrayed an extraordinary subtlety and delicacy of feeling. He hit upon the surest way of extricating himself from a situation that he found embarrassing. He stirred and aroused the noblest aspirations of the human heart – to forgive and repay evil with good. He put himself in the hands of the person he had injured, and appealed to her for sympathy and help. He stirred the pride of a woman who was already in love with him by openly admitting to her that she has a rival, and while eliciting her sympathy for that rival, he yet secured her forgiveness and the promise of disinterested sisterly love for himself. To enter upon such explanations and at the same time not to insult or cause offence, is something not even the subtlest and wisest of men would be able to manage. It takes an unspoilt, youthful, well-balanced temperament such as his to bring it off. I'm sure, Natalya Nikolayevna, you played no part either by word or deed in his decision today. Perhaps you have only just found out yourself about it from him. I'm not mistaken, or am I?"

"You are not mistaken," Natasha replied, her face glowing and her eyes shining with a strange intensity. The Prince's reasoning was

beginning to take effect. “I’ve not seen Alyosha for five days,” she added. “It was entirely his idea, and he acted quite independently.”

“Quite so,” the Prince confirmed, “but nevertheless all this unexpected insight, all this determination, this awareness of duty, in effect all this noble steadfastness is the result of your influence upon him. I only came to appreciate this fully and was able to reflect on it just now on the way home, and having reflected on it, I suddenly felt empowered to come to a decision. Our engagement with the Countess’s family is broken off for good. It cannot be reinstated, and even if it could, it won’t. After all, I have personally concluded that you alone can make him happy, that you are his true mentor, that you have already laid the foundations of his future happiness! I’ve hidden nothing from you and am hiding nothing now. I value ambition, money, status, even rank. I’m all too aware that much of that is sheer convention, but I like such conventions and would never want to flout them. But there are circumstances when one has to take other things into consideration, when one cannot apply the same standards everywhere… Besides, I love my son too much. In short, I have come to the conclusion that Alyosha must not be parted from you, because without you he would perish. And, I might as well admit it, I came to this decision perhaps a good month ago and only now realize I’ve made the right decision. Of course I could have come to tell you all this tomorrow rather than disturb you in the middle of the night. But perhaps my present haste will show you how passionately and, more importantly, how sincerely I regard this matter. I’m no longer of an age when I can act on impulse. When I entered your room, all had already been considered and my mind made up. However, I think a lot more time will be needed before you are fully convinced of my sincerity… But, to come to the point! Shall I tell you why I’ve come to you now? I’ve come to do my duty by you and to ask you solemnly and with the deepest respect to grant my son the happiness of your hand in marriage. Oh, don’t imagine I’ve come here as a tyrannical father who has relented at last and decided to forgive his children, mercifully allowing them their happiness. No, not at all! If you were to attribute such thoughts to me, you’d do me an injustice. And do not suppose either that I was counting in advance on your agreement, relying on what you’d already sacrificed for my son. Once again, no! I

would be the first to admit that he is not worthy of you, and – being good-hearted and truthful – he would confirm this himself. But that is not enough. It was not that alone which brought me here at such an hour… I came here…" and he respectfully and somewhat solemnly rose from his seat… "I came here to try to win your friendship! I know I've no right to it whatever, quite the contrary! But – please allow me to try. Don't deny me the opportunity!"

Bowing respectfully to Natasha, he awaited her answer. All the time he was speaking I had been watching him intently. He had noticed this.

He delivered his speech dispassionately with some flourish of eloquence and at times even lapsing into a certain insouciance. The whole tone of his speech seemed occasionally at variance with the impulse that had brought him to us at such an inappropriate hour for a first visit, especially considering the state of our relationship. Some of his expressions were clearly premeditated, and at some points of his speech, which was remarkable for its length, he seemed to be posing deliberately as an eccentric struggling to hide an irrupting emotion behind a guise of humour, pleasantry and witticisms. But all this I divined later; at the time it was quite another matter. His concluding words were said with such animation, such feeling, such apparently sincere respect for Natasha, that he won us all over. There was even a hint of a tear to be glimpsed upon his eyelashes. Natasha's gentle heart was entirely enraptured. Deeply moved, she too rose from her seat and silently offered her hand to him. He took it and kissed it tenderly and fervently. Alyosha was beside himself with delight.

"What did I tell you, Natasha?" he cried. "You didn't believe me! You didn't believe that he is the noblest man in the world. You see, now you see for yourself!…"

He rushed to his father and hugged him excitedly. The latter responded likewise but hastened to cut short the emotional scene as if he were ashamed of betraying his feelings.

"That's enough," he said, picking up his hat. "I'm off. I asked for only ten minutes of your time," he added with a laugh, "and I've been sitting here a whole hour. But as I leave, I'm dying with impatience to meet you again as soon as possible. Would you allow me to visit you as often as possible?"

"Yes, yes," Natasha answered, "as often as you wish. I'm anxious to… to be your close friend…" she added in embarrassment.

"How sincere, how sweet of you!" the Prince said, smiling. "Not even for trite politeness's sake could you tell a white lie. But your sincerity is worth more than all those spurious civilities. Yes, I realize it will take me a long, long time to earn your trust."

"I beg you, don't flatter me… don't," Natasha whispered in confusion. How pretty she looked at that moment!

"Very well," the Prince said. "A few practical words in parting though. Can you imagine the sheer bad luck? I cannot be with you tomorrow, or the day after. Tonight I received a letter requiring my immediate intervention in a business matter so pressing that I simply cannot postpone it. I'm leaving St Petersburg tomorrow morning. Please don't imagine I called on you so late just because there would be no time tomorrow or the day after. Of course you won't think any such thing, but there you have an instance of my mistrustful nature! Why should I have assumed that you would think just that? Yes, my mistrustfulness has hampered me greatly in life, and the whole rift between me and your family is perhaps merely a consequence of my unfortunate character!… Today's Tuesday. Let me see, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday I shall not be in St Petersburg. I hope to be back definitely by Saturday and will call on you that very day. Please tell me, may I come to you for the whole evening?"

"Certainly!" Natasha exclaimed. "I'll expect you on Saturday. I'll look forward to it!"

"Ah, how happy I am! I shall get to know you all the better! Well… I'm off. But I can't leave without shaking your hand," he said, suddenly turning to me. "Forgive me! We've all been talking at cross purposes… I've had the pleasure of meeting you several times, and once we were actually introduced. I cannot leave without letting you know how pleased I'd be to renew our acquaintanceship."

"It's true we met," I replied, shaking his hand, "but I'm sorry, I don't recall being introduced."

"Last year at Prince R.'s."

"I beg your pardon, I forgot. But I assure you I shall not forget this time. This evening has been a particularly memorable one for me."

"Yes, you're right, for me too. I know from way back that you've been a true and sincere friend of Natalya Nikolayevna and my son. I hope you will see me as the fourth member of your threesome. Will you?" he added, turning to Natasha.

"Yes, he has been a true friend to us and we must all stick together," Natasha replied earnestly. Poor thing! She was positively bursting with joy that the Prince had not neglected to approach me. She did love me so much!

"I have met many admirers of your talent," the Prince went on, "and I know two of your staunchest champions. They will be thrilled to make your acquaintance personally. I refer to my dearest friend the Countess and her stepdaughter Katerina Fyodorovna Filimonova. Promise me you will not deny me the pleasure of introducing you to those ladies."

"I'm very flattered, I'm sure, although I see very few people these days…"

"But let me have your address. Where do you live? It would be my pleasure…"

"I do not entertain visitors, Prince, not at present, anyway…"

"But although I could not presume to be made an exception… still…"

"By all means, since you ask, I shall be delighted. I live in Klugen's house, ***m Street."

"In Klugen's house?" he exclaimed, as if struck by something. "Goodness! Have you… lived there long?"

"No, not long," I replied, unable to take my eyes off him. "I live at number forty-four."

"Number forty-four? Do you… live alone?"

"Quite alone."

"Ah yes! I only ask because… I think I know the house. So much the better… I shall definitely visit you, definitely! There is a lot I must discuss with you, and I'm sure you won't disappoint me. You can oblige me in many ways. You see, I've started off straight away by asking a favour of you. But goodbye for now! Let me shake your hand once more!"

He shook hands with me and with Alyosha, kissed Natasha's hand again, and went out without bidding Alyosha to follow him.

The three of us remained greatly embarrassed. It had all happened so unexpectedly, so fortuitously. We all felt that in a single instant everything had changed and something new and unknown had intervened. Without a word Alyosha sat down beside Natasha and kissed her hand gently. From time to time he would glance at her face as if wondering what she would say.

"Darling, Alyosha, make sure you go to see Katerina Fyodorovna tomorrow," she said at last.

"Yes, that's just what I was thinking of doing," he replied. "I'll definitely go."

"But perhaps it'll be painful for her to see you?… What's to be done?"

"I don't know, my dear. I thought about that too. I'll see… I'll play it by ear. Well, Natasha, everything's changed for us, hasn't it?" Alyosha could not restrain himself.

She smiled and cast him a long, tender look.

"And isn't he tactful? He could see how poor your accommodation is, but not a word—"

"About what?"

"Well… about moving somewhere else… or something," he said, his face flushing red.

"Don't be silly, Alyosha. Why should he have?"

"Exactly, that's what I meant, he's so tactful. And how he praised you! I told you as much… didn't I? Yes, he can understand and see through everything! But he talked about me as if I were a child. That's how they look upon me all the time! Well, no doubt I am one."

"You are a child, but you understand things better than any of us. You're so sweet, Alyosha!"

"But he said my kind heart was my undoing. What did he mean? I don't understand. But you know what, Natasha? Perhaps I should go after him as quickly as possible. I'll be back with you tomorrow by first light."

"Yes, go, my darling, do go! That's a good idea. And make sure he sees you, do you hear me! But tomorrow come back here as soon as you can. You won't leave me for five days at a stretch this time now, will you?" she added craftily, caressing him with a glance. We were all in a state of quiet but overflowing joy.

"Are you coming with me, Vanya?" Alyosha asked as he prepared to leave the room.

"No, he'll stay here. There are things we need to talk over, Vanya. Mind, tomorrow at first light!"

"At first light! Bye, Mavra!"

Mavra was in quite a state. She heard everything the Prince had said, she had eavesdropped on everything, but a lot of it had gone over her head. She would have liked to enquire and hazard some guesses. But for the time being she was content to maintain an air of haughty seriousness. She too was aware that much had changed.

We were left alone. Natasha took my hand and for a while said nothing, as if wondering what to say.

"I'm tired," she said at last in a weak voice. "Listen, you are going to my parents' tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Certainly."

"Tell Mama, but don't say anything to *him*."

"Well, I never do say anything to him about you anyway."

"Quite, quite, he'll find out just the same. Be sure though you pay attention to what he says. See how he takes it. Oh my God, Vanya! What do you suppose, is he really going to curse me for this marriage! No, he couldn't do that!"

"The Prince will have to sort it all out," I added quickly. "He'll just have to make his peace with him and then everything will be all right."

"Oh my God! If only! If only!" she cried entreatingly.

"Don't worry Natasha. It'll all come out all right. Everything points that way."

She threw me a penetrating glance.

"Vanya! What do you think of the Prince?"

"If he was speaking sincerely, then I'd say he's a thoroughly honourable man."

"If he was speaking sincerely? What does that mean? Surely he couldn't have been speaking insincerely, could he?"

"I should think not," I replied. Something was bothering her, I thought to myself. Odd!

"You kept looking at him… so intently."

"Yes, I thought there was something a little strange about him."

"Yes, me too. He kept talking in such a… I'm tired, my dear. You know, you'd better go home too. And come and see me tomorrow as soon as possible after you've been to see my parents. But listen, you don't think it was improper of me, was it, to say I wanted to be a close friend of his?"

"No… why should it have been?"

"And… it wasn't stupid? After all, I suppose it meant I'm nowhere near close to him yet."

"On the contrary, it was a nice, honest and spontaneous thing to say. You were so lovely at that moment! With all his aristocratic graces he'd have had to be very stupid indeed not to have appreciated that."

"You seem angry with him, Vanya? But how nasty I am though, how suspicious and vain! Don't laugh, you know I don't hide anything from you. Oh, Vanya, you're such a good friend! If I'm unhappy again, if I'm in trouble, you'll stay by me, won't you? Probably no one else will! How can I ever make up to you for everything? Vanya, you won't ever think badly of me, will you?…"

As soon as I got home I undressed and went to bed. It was as damp and dark in my room as in a cellar. I was haunted by strange thoughts and feelings and for a long time I could not get to sleep.

But how a certain individual must have been laughing at that moment as he fell asleep in his comfortable bed! That is if he thought us worthy of his mirth, which he probably did not!

3

THE FOLLOWING MORNING at about ten o'clock, as I was hurrying out of the house to get to the Ikhmenevs on Vasìlevsky Island, in order to proceed as quickly as possible to Natasha's, I ran into my visitor of the day before, Smith's granddaughter. She was on her way to visit me. I don't know why, but I remember I was delighted to see her. The previous evening I had not even had time to have a good look at her, but now by daylight she surprised me even more. It would be hard to find a stranger, more unusual creature, at least by outward appearances. Small, with flashing, somehow un-Russian black eyes, thick tousled black hair and a mysterious, obstinately questioning gaze, she could have drawn the attention of any passer-by in the street. Her expression was particularly striking – a mixture of sparkling intelligence and a kind of inquisitive mistrust, even suspiciousness. Her bedraggled and dirty frock looked even more tattered by daylight than it had the night before. I thought she seemed to be suffering from some chronic illness that was gradually but relentlessly destroying her. Her pale, thin face was of a yellow, unnaturally sallow hue. But on the whole, in spite of all the ravages of poverty and disease, she was quite a pretty little thing. Her eyebrows were sharp, fine and beautiful; her wide, fairly low forehead was particularly lovely, and her lips were beautifully shaped, with a sort of proud, brave cast, but pallid, with just a touch of colour in them.

"Ah, it's you again!" I exclaimed, "I thought you might come. Come in!"

She stepped slowly across the threshold like the day before, gazing around anxiously. She carefully surveyed the room where her grandfather had lived, as if noting how much the room had been changed by its new occupant. Like grandfather, like granddaughter, I thought. Is she all there? I wondered. She didn't speak. I waited.

"I came for the books!" she whispered at last, lowering her gaze.

"Ah, yes! Your books, here they are, take them! I kept them specially for you."

She looked at me curiously and her mouth gave a strange little twist as if she wanted to venture a hesitant smile. But the impulse to smile faded and her expression again took on its former severe and enigmatic aspect.

"Did Granddad really speak to you about me?" she asked, looking me up and down ironically.

"No, he didn't speak about you, but he—"

"So how did you know I'd come? Who told you?" she asked, interrupting me quickly.

"Because I didn't think your grandfather could have survived on his own, abandoned by everyone. He was so old and weak, that's why I thought someone must have been coming to visit him. Here, take your books. Are you studying from them?"

"No."

"So what do you want them for?"

"Granddad used to teach me when I came to see him."

"And did you stop coming to see him?"

"Later I did… I fell ill," she added as if to justify herself.

"Have you got any family – mother, father?"

She suddenly frowned and even shot me a fearful glance. Then, just as the previous day, she lowered her eyes, turned and headed for the door without favouring me with an answer. I watched her in astonishment. But she stopped at the threshold.

"What did he die of?" she asked abruptly, turning slightly towards me with precisely the same gesture and movement as the day before, when as she was going out she had stopped and, facing the door, enquired about Azorka.

I went up to her to tell her briefly what happened. She listened with silent curiosity, her eyes cast down and her back to me. I told her also how, when he was dying, the old man had talked about Sixth Lane.

"I guessed," I added, "that probably someone dear to him lived there, so I expected someone to come and enquire after him. He must have loved you, since he thought of you in his last moments."

"No," she whispered almost to herself, "he didn't love me."

She was very upset. As I talked I kept leaning down to her to look in her face. I noticed that she was struggling desperately to control her agitation, as though she were too proud to let me see it. She was turning paler and paler and biting hard on her lower lip. But what struck me most forcibly was the frantic beating of her heart. It thumped harder and harder until it could be heard at two or three paces, as if she were having a heart attack. I thought she was going to burst into tears as she had done the day before, but she regained her self-control.

"Where's the fence?"

"What fence?"

"The one where he died."

"I'll show you… when we go out. Now listen, what's your name?"

"Don't…"

"Don't what?"

"Don't… it doesn't matter. I haven't got a name," she said abruptly, in apparent ill humour, and made as if to go. I stopped her.

"Stop, you funny little girl! I want to help you, you know. I've felt so sorry for you ever since yesterday when you were crying in the corner on the stairs. I can't bear to think of it… Anyway, your grandfather died in my arms, and he was probably thinking of you when he mentioned Sixth Lane, so in a manner of speaking he left you in my care. I dream about him… I kept your books for you, and you're such a wild little thing, as if you're afraid of me. You're obviously very poor and perhaps an orphan left with strangers, is that so?"

I did my best to win her over, and I don't know myself why I was so drawn to her. There was something besides pity in my feelings towards her. Whether it was the mysteriousness of the circumstances, or the impression that Smith had left on me, or my own whimsical mood – I just don't know, but something drew me irresistibly to her. My words

seemed to touch a chord in her; she looked at me strangely, not harshly any more, but mildly and steadily; then she looked down again as if lost in thought.

"Yelena," she whispered suddenly, unexpectedly and very softly.

"Is that your name then, Yelena?"

"Yes…"

"So then, will you come and visit me?"

"I can't… I don't know… I'll come," she whispered thoughtfully as though in some inner struggle. Just then a wall clock suddenly struck somewhere. She shuddered and, looking at me with indescribable anguish, whispered, "What time is it?"

"Must be half-past ten."

She let out a cry of alarm.

"Oh God!" she said and started to run. But I stopped her again in the hallway.

"I'm not letting you go like that," I said. "What are you afraid of? Are you late?"

"Yes, yes, I sneaked out! Let me go! She'll beat me!" she cried, evidently having said more than she meant to, and tore herself free from my grasp.

"Listen, don't rush! You have to go to Vasìlevsky Island, and so have I, to Thirteenth Lane. I'm late too and I'm going to take a cab. Do you want to come with me? I'll take you. It'll be quicker than walking…"

"You mustn't come to the house, you mustn't," she cried in even greater terror. Her face was fairly distorted with fear at the mere thought that I might go to the house where she lived.

"I told you, I'm going to Thirteenth Lane on my own business, not to your house! I won't follow you. We'll get there quickly in a cab. Come on!"

We ran downstairs quickly. I hailed the first cab that came in sight, a decidedly rickety affair. Yelena was obviously in a great hurry or she would not have agreed to get in with me. What was even more baffling to me subsequently was that I did not even dare question her. When I asked her who it was at home that she was so frightened of, she threw up her arms and practically leapt out of the cab. What's all the mystery about? I wondered.

She was very uncomfortable, sitting in the cab. With every jolt she grabbed at my coat for support with her dirty, chapped little left hand. In her other hand she was clutching her books tightly; it was obvious they were very precious to her. Trying to adjust her posture, she exposed her foot, and to my astonishment I noticed that she was wearing only a pair of worn-out shoes with no stockings. Now, although I had decided not to ask her anything, once again I couldn't restrain myself.

"Haven't you got any stockings?" I asked. "How can you go barefoot when it's so cold and damp?"

"No, I haven't" she answered curtly.

"Good Lord, you must live with someone! You could have asked for stockings if you had to go out."

"I do as I please."

"But you'll catch your death of cold."

"So what?"

She clearly did not want to answer and was getting angry at my questions.

"This is where he died," I said, pointing out to her the house where the old man had collapsed.

She gazed at it and suddenly, turning to me with an imploring look, said, "For God's sake, don't come in. But I'll come to see you, I will! As soon as I can, I'll come!"

"All right. I've already told you I won't come in. But what are you afraid of? You're obviously unhappy about something. I don't like to see you like this…"

"I'm not afraid of anyone," she replied with a kind of irritation in her voice.

"But just now you said, 'She'll beat me.'".

"Let her!" she answered, and her eyes flashed. "Let her! Let her beat me!" she repeated bitterly, and her upper lip trembled and lifted slightly in scorn.

At last we arrived on Vasìlevsky Island. She stopped the cab at the top of Sixth Lane and jumped out, looking around anxiously.

"Keep going! I'll come, I will!" she repeated, imploring me frantically not to follow her. "Drive on, quickly, quickly!"

I drove on. But a few yards along the embankment, I dismissed the cabby and turned back into Sixth Lane, quickly crossing over to the other side. I saw her; she had not yet had time to get far, although she was walking fast and kept looking around; she even stopped for a second to check if I was following her. But I dived into a nearby doorway and she failed to notice me. She went on and I followed her, keeping to the other side of the street.

My curiosity was thoroughly aroused. Although I had no intention of going in, I was determined to find out which house she would enter, just in case. I was in a state of deep, strange emotional unease, not unlike what had been brought on by her grandfather in the coffee house about the time that Azorka died…

4

WE WALKED A LONG WAY, as far as Maly Prospect. She was almost running; then she darted into a shop. I stopped and waited. Surely, she can't live in a shop, I thought.

And indeed, a minute later she came out, but she no longer had the books. Instead, she was carrying an earthenware bowl. Having walked a little further, she passed through the gate of a rather nondescript house. It was an old, small, though stone, two-storey structure, painted a dirty yellow. In one of the three-ground floor windows was a miniature red coffin – indicating that a coffin-maker ran a small business from there. The windows of the upper floor were extremely small and square with cracked dull-green panes, through which one glimpsed a set of pink cotton curtains. I crossed the street, went up to the house and read on a metal plaque above the gate: "Mrs Bubnova".

But no sooner had I made out the inscription than a woman's piercing scream resounded from the yard of Mrs Bubnova's house, followed by a torrent of abuse. I peered through the gate; on the wooden steps of the house stood a fat woman, a typical townie, in a bonnet and a green shawl. Her face bore a revolting purplish tinge; her small, deep-set, bloodshot eyes glistened with fury. Even though it was not yet noon, she was already under the influence. She was screaming at poor Yelena, who stood before her rigid with fear, holding the bowl in her hands. On the steps, peering over the shoulder of the purple-faced woman, stood another dishevelled female, brightly rouged and heavily powdered. In a little while the basement door opened and, doubtless attracted by the screaming, a middle-aged, poorly dressed woman of demure and

modest appearance came out onto the steps. Through this half-open door peered the other occupants of the ground floor, a frail old man and a girl. A tall, strapping fellow, probably the caretaker, stood in the middle of the yard with a broom in his hands and surveyed the whole scene abstractedly.

"Oh you damned bloodsucker, you louse, you!" the woman screamed, letting out an unpunctuated stream of abuse, gasping but not pausing for breath, "so this is how you repay me for all my care, you shaggy wretch! I send her for some gherkins and off she sneaks! I knew it in my heart when I sent her she'd slope off. I felt it in me bones, I did! Last night I practically scalped her for it and today she's up to the same old trick! Where've you been, you strumpet, where? Who could you go running to, you damned freak, you poisonous wretch, who? Tell me, you bog-trotting vermin, or I'll strangle you on the spot!"

And the infuriated woman rushed at the poor child, but catching sight of the woman from the basement who was watching from the steps, stopped short and turned to her, yelling more shrilly than ever and waving her arms as though appealing to her to bear witness to the monstrous crime of her pitiful victim.

"When her mother snuffed it you know yourselves, good people, she was left with no one in the world. I saw you poor folks had nothing to eat yourselves, never mind having her on your hands, so I thought, well, for St Nicholas's sake I'll do the orphan a favour and take her in. And I did. Can you imagine though? I've been looking after her two months now and the whole two months she's been doing nothing but bleed me dry, gnaw at my milky-white flesh! You leech! Rattlesnake! You bloody-minded she-devil! She won't say a word if I beat her or not, she won't, you know. She just keeps mum – stubborn as a mule! She's doing my head in with her dumb insolence. Who do you think you are, a grand lady or something, you pink-arsed monkey? If it hadn't been for me you'd have starved to death in the streets. You should be ready to wash my feet and drink the water, you little monster, you thorn in my flesh! You'd have been done for but for me!"

"Come now, Anna Trifonovna, what are you getting yourself so worked up about?" the woman whom the furious termagant was addressing asked respectfully. "What has she done to upset you now?"

"You may well ask, my good woman. I won't be thwarted! Right or wrong, I expect to be obeyed. That's how I am. She almost sent me to an early grave this morning! I send her to the shop for some pickled gherkins, and she comes back three hours later! I knew it, and my heart bled – it did you know, my poor heart, it bled, it did! Where you've been? Where did you go? Who are your cronies now? Haven't I been good to her? Her slut of a mother never paid me back the fourteen roubles she owed me and I had to bury her at my own expense, which meant I was left with the little minx on my hands, but you know all this, dear lady, you know it! Doesn't that give me a claim over her? You'd have expected her to have some feelings, but instead she goes against me! I meant to make her happy. I wanted to dress her in muslin shifts, the little strumpet. I bought her boots on the market and dressed her up to the nines – a sight for sore eyes she was! And what do you think she did, good people? In two days she had ripped the shift to shreds, ripped it to bits, and that's how she walks around now, she does! And don't get me wrong, she did it deliberately – never a truer word's been spoken, saw it with my own eyes. 'Don't want any fancy stuff, just plain clothes,' she reckons. Well, that's as much as I could stand, so I gave her the thrashing of her life, had to call out the doctor and pay him good money in the end. If I went and killed you, you little louse, no milk for a week would be my only penance! I got her to scrub the floors in punishment. And imagine – she did! Just carried on scrubbing, the vixen did! I was sorely pained – but she wouldn't let up, she wouldn't! Well, I thought to myself, she's bound to give me the slip! And, no sooner had I thought of it – she was gone, yesterday, to be sure! You heard yourselves, good people, how I beat her for it, fairly hurt my hands on her, left her without shoes or stockings, thinking to myself, she's not likely to scarper barefoot. But she only does it and goes there again today! Where've you been? Answer me! Who did you complain to, you snake in the grass, who did you go and bleat to? Answer me, you gypsy, you foreign spook, speak up!"

Beside herself with fury, she pounced on the little girl who was out of her mind with fright, grabbed her by the hair and hurled her to the ground. The bowl with the pickled gherkins was knocked out of her hands and shattered; this enraged the drunken termagant even more.

She hit her victim across the face and head, but Yelena stubbornly kept her silence – not a sound, not a squeak, not a word of complaint as the blows rained down upon her. I rushed into the yard, mad with indignation, straight at the drunken woman.

"What are you doing? How dare you treat a poor orphan so!" I exclaimed, grabbing the harridan by her hand.

"What's this! Who the hell are you?" she squealed, letting go of Yelena and putting her hands on her hips. "What's your business in my house?"

"My business is that you're merciless!" I yelled. "How dare you bully a poor child so? She's not yours. I heard it myself, you merely took her in, the poor thing…"

"Lord Jesus!" the harridan cried. "Who the hell do you think you are! Did you come with her or what? I'll call the constable! Andron Timofeych himself thinks the world of me! Is it you, by any chance, she keeps going to see? We've a right one here! A troublemaker, a trespasser! Help!"

And she went for me, fists flailing. But at that moment there was a piercing, inhuman cry. I looked around. Yelena, who had previously been standing as though insensate, suddenly let out a terrible, unnatural scream and hit the ground, writhing in fearful spasms. Her features went into spasms. It was an attack of the falling sickness. The dishevelled girl and a woman from downstairs rushed up, lifted her and took her hurriedly upstairs.

"Die, you damn wretch, for all I care!" the woman screamed after them. "That's the third fit in a month… Get out of here, you busybody!" and she charged at me again.

"Don't just stand there, janitor! That's not what you're paid for!"

"Go on! Be off with you! Unless you want a clip round your ears," the caretaker droned lethargically as though merely for form's sake. "Two's company, three's a crowd. Had your say, now clear off!"

There was nothing to be done, I walked out through the gates, convinced that my outburst had proved totally ineffectual. But I was seething with indignation. I positioned myself on the pavement opposite and kept my eyes fixed on the house gate. As soon as I left, the woman rushed upstairs, while the caretaker, having done his duty, also disappeared somewhere. Shortly the woman who had helped to carry

Yelena, came down from the porch, hurrying to her place below. Catching sight of me, she stopped and looked at me curiously. Her kind, tranquil face encouraged me. I entered the yard again and went straight up to her.

"May I ask," I began, "who is this girl and what is this awful woman up to with her? Please don't imagine I'm asking this simply out of idle curiosity. I've met this girl before and have a good reason to be very concerned about her."

"Well if you are concerned, you'd better take her with you or find her some other place, rather than let her perish here," the woman said somehow reluctantly, preparing to continue on her way.

"But if you won't give me any information, what am I to do? I told you, I don't know anything. Is it true Bubnova is the landlady?"

"She is indeed."

"So how did this girl end up with her? Is this where her mother died?"

"You may well ask… nothing to do with us." And she again prepared to go.

"Do me a favour. I'm telling you, I'm very concerned about this. Perhaps I am in fact in a position to do something. Who is this girl anyway? Who was her mother – do you know?"

"A foreigner of some sort, not a local, that's for sure. She lived downstairs, but was altogether poorly, if you ask me. Died of consumption, she did."

"Must have been pretty badly off too if she had to live in the basement of a tip like this."

"Badly off indeed! She made my heart bleed. God knows we have to struggle ourselves, but she still managed to run up a debt of six roubles with us in the five months she stayed here. We ended up burying her ourselves – my husband made her coffin too."

"What about Bubnova saying she buried her?

"A likely story!"

"And what was her name?"

"Now you got me there, kind sir. A tongue-twister – German, very likely."

"Smith?"

"No, that doesn't sound right. But one way or another Anna Trifonovna took the orphan in – to make a lady of her, she says. Bad business that altogether…"

"Probably with some plans of her own up her sleeve?"

"She's up to no good, I tell you," the woman replied somewhat reflectively and hesitatingly, as though unsure whether to continue or not. "Nothing to do with us though, we mind our own business…"

"If only you'd learn to hold your tongue once in a while, woman!" a male voice came from the back. It was the woman's husband, an elderly man in a dressing gown with a kaftan over it, a townsman and craftsman by the looks of him.

"Look here, sir, she's got nothing at all to say to you. It's none of our business…" he said, looking at me askance. "Get back in, woman! Goodbye to you, sir. We're coffin-makers by trade. Should you ever need our professional services, we'd be most happy to oblige… That apart we've no other business with you…"

I left that house deep in thought and highly agitated. There was nothing I could do, but I felt I could not just leave matters be. There was something in what the coffin-maker's wife said that disturbed me no end. A fishy business all round, I felt.

I was walking immersed in thought, my eyes to the ground, when suddenly a shrill voice hailed me by name. I looked up to see before me a man, rather the worse for drink, unsteady on his legs but dressed rather neatly, except for an awful-looking overcoat and a greasy cap. His face was very familiar. I looked at him more closely. He winked and smiled slyly.

"You don't recognize me?"

5

"AH! IT'S YOU, MASLOBOYEV!" I EXCLAIMED, suddenly recognizing in him my former schoolmate from the district high school. "Well, I never!"

"Knock me down with a feather! Must be all of six years. That is to say, we have met since, only Your Highness wouldn't favour me with a second glance. My word, you're a veritable general now, a literary one, that is—" Saying this, he smiled derisively.

"Come, come Masloboyev, old chum, you know that's not true," I interrupted him. "First, generals, be they literary, hardly look like me, and second, now you mention it, I do in fact remember running into you in the street a couple of times, but it was you who avoided me, so I thought, what's the point approaching someone who just doesn't want to know? And shall I tell you what I'm thinking? If you hadn't had a few, you wouldn't have stopped me now either. Am I not right? Well, good to see you! You know, old fellow, I really am delighted to have run into you."

"You don't say! Are you quite sure you're not embarrassed by my… indecorous appearance? Well, no need to go on about it. It's not that important. I'll never forget, Vanya, my son, what a lovely lad you were. Remember that time you got the cane because of me? You kept mum and didn't split on me, while I, instead of being grateful, kept pulling your leg for days afterwards. What an innocent lamb you were! So, hello then, old chap, how are you!" (We embraced each other.) "I've been struggling on my own for donkey's years now – how the days flash

past! – but I've a long memory. That's just the way I am! And how about you, what have you been up to?"

"Well, nothing special. I've too been struggling on my own…"

He regarded me for a long time with the maudlin eyes of the inebriated. To be sure, he was a decent fellow through and through.

"No, Vanya, you're not the same as me!" he said at last in a tragic tone of voice. "I've read your thing, you know. I have indeed, Vanya, yes I have!… Listen though – why don't we have a heart-to-heart talk! Are you in a hurry?"

"I am. And I might as well tell you, I'm terribly upset about something. Look, I've a better idea – where do you live?"

"I'll tell you. But it's not a better one. Shall I tell you what is a better idea?"

"Well, what?"

"Listen! See that?" And he pointed to a sign about ten paces from where we were standing. "Can you see: *Coffee House and Restaurant* – in a word it's just an eating place, but it's all right. And there's another thing, the establishment's quite fit and proper; as for the vodka – it's out of this world! Fit for the tsar! I should know, I've tried it, many a time. Anyway, they wouldn't dare serve me anything below standard. They know who Filip Filipych is. I am Filip Filipych, I'll have you know. What? Stop making faces! No, you let me finish. It's quarter-past eleven now, I've just looked. Well then, at eleven thirty-five sharp I'll let you go. In the meantime, let's go and knock back a few. Twenty minutes, for old time's sake – agreed?"

"If it's only twenty minutes, then all right. Because, my friend, honest to God, I'm so busy…"

"That's settled then. Only look here, two words before anything else – you look just awful, as though somebody had given you the what-for. Am I right?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"I thought as much. I'm a bit of a dab hand at studying people's faces – it's something to do anyway! Well then, let's go and talk. In twenty minutes I'll get Admiral Samovar on the boil and we'll have a chance to sample some birch-bud brandy, chase it with a shot of the neat stuff, followed by a dram of the orange-flavoured one, followed by your

heart's delight, pursued by whatever else I may think of. Drink's my weakness, old chap! The only time I'm fit for anything is Sundays before midday Mass. Don't mind if you have none. All I want is your company. If you join in though, that'll be the gentleman in you. Let's go! Bit of a chinwag and we can go our separate ways for the next ten years or so. We're no birds of a feather, Vanya, you and me!"

"Stop jabbering, and let's go. I give you twenty minutes, then I'm off."

The dining room on the first floor was reached by climbing three angled flights of wooden stairs ending in a small set of steps that led to the next floor. On the way up we bumped into two well-oiled gentlemen. Seeing us they stood aside, swaying.

One of them was a very young, bumptious-looking, smooth-faced lad with just a faint crop of whiskers and an intensely stupid expression on his face. His dress was rather foppish, but in a funny kind of way, as though it didn't belong to him; he was sporting rings with precious stones on his fingers and an expensive jewelled tiepin; a ridiculous forelock of hair completed the picture. He could not help smiling and sniggering all the time. His companion was a man of about fifty, stout, pot-bellied, dressed in a rather careless manner, also sporting a large tiepin, but bald with just the occasional tuft of hair above a sagging, inebriated, pock-marked face and a pair of glasses perched on a button-like nose. The expression on his face was ill-humoured and sensuous. His mean, viciously mistrustful eyes were reduced to narrow slits by surrounding folds of fat. Apparently they both knew Masloboyev, but on meeting us, the fat one screwed up his face, though only for an instant, into a doleful grimace, while the youngster simply dissolved in an ingratiatingly oleaginous smile. He even doffed his cap – he wore a cap.

"Beg your pardon, Filip Filipych," he muttered, looking at Masloboyev obsequiously.

"What's up?"

"Awfully sorry… and all that…" (He gave his shirt collar a flick.)* "You'll find Mitroshka sitting over there. Well, the man's a right scoundrel, Filip Filipych."

"What are you on about?"

"Nothing, really… except it was Mitroshka's doing: they smeared sour cream all over his face" – he motioned his head towards his companion – "the other week in a whorehouse… hehe!"

The fat man poked him with his elbow in annoyance.

"Wouldn't you like to join us, Filip Filipych, at Dussot's to crack half a case or so of bubbly? May we have the pleasure of your company?"

"No, my dear fellow, not now," Masloboyev replied. "I'm busy."

"Hehe! So am I, as a matter of fact I'd like to pick your brains…" His friend again nudged him with his elbow.

"Later, later."

Masloboyev deliberately avoided looking at them. But no sooner had we entered the first room, with a laden food counter stretching its whole length – stone-baked pies, pasties and carafes with different-coloured infusions – than Masloboyev quickly took me to a corner and said, "The young one's Sizobryukhov – he's on a spree, son of a famous corn merchant, who left him half a million. He came back from Paris where he blew no end of money and would have gone through the lot most likely, but then he came into another inheritance from his uncle, and now he's finishing that off too on native soil. Give him a year and he'll be passing the hat around. He's as thick as two planks – but hangs out in the most expensive restaurants, cellar bars and taverns, not to mention all the actresses he calls on, even applied for a commission in the hussars recently. The older one – Arkhipov – is something of a merchant or business manager, has dabbled in the wine trade too, a proper rogue and crook, and now he's Sizobryukhov's crony, Judas and Falstaff rolled into one, has been bankrupted twice, a sickening dirty old bastard with every perversion under the sun. Apropos this, he could have been up on a charge in a case I was pursuing, but he managed to wriggle out. As it happens, I'm very glad indeed I met him here. I've been looking out for him… It goes without saying Arkhipov's fleecing the youngster. He knows every nook and cranny in town, hence his appeal to such greenhorns. Don't worry my friend, I've had my eye on him for a long time. So has Mitroshka, that strapping fellow over there in the expensive frock coat – there look, over by the window, the gypsy-looking one. He trades in horses and knows every local hussar. He's such a con artist, I tell you, he'll forge a banknote right in front of your

very eyes, and though you'll have seen it done, you'll still go and change it for him. He's sporting that coat now, velveteen to be sure, pretty traditional (it suits him, I must admit), but if you dressed him up in a good suit of tails and all the rest of it, took him to some exclusive gentleman's club and introduced him as the wealthy Count Barabanov, say, he'd fool everyone for the best part of two hours – and he'd sit down to a game of cards, talk like a proper toff, and nobody'd smell a rat – everybody'd be taken in. He'll come to no good. He's now fallen upon lean times and is all out to get old fat-guts who's lured his former pal Sizobryukhov away from him before he'd had a chance to pick the youngster clean himself. If they've all ended up in this joint, there's bound to be something fishy afoot. And I could even tell you what, and wouldn't mind betting it was Mitroshka, and no one else, who passed the word to me that Arkhipov and Sizobryukhov would be slinking around here up to some mischief or other. For reasons of my own I want to take advantage of Mitroshka's hatred for Arkhipov, and that as a matter of fact is mainly what brought me here now. But I don't want Mitroshka to twig, so don't keep staring at him either. When the time comes for us to leave, he'll no doubt approach me himself and tell me all I need to know… And now let's go, Vanya, through to that room, see? Well, Stepan," he continued, turning to a waiter, "do you know what it is I require?"

"I do, sir."

"And can you oblige?"

"Indeed, sir."

"Go ahead then. Sit down, Vanya. Well, why are you looking at me like that? Of course I see you're looking at me. You're astonished? No need! Anything can happen to a man that wouldn't have occurred to him even in his wildest dreams – especially then… well, say, in those dim and distant days when you and I were swotting up Cornelius Nepos![*] Look here, Vanya, remember one thing: Masloboyev may have strayed from the path of righteousness, but his heart is still in the right place, it's only the circumstances that have changed. I may be a pot, but no blacker than the kettle. I had a shot at being a doctor, I aspired to be a teacher of our Russian literature, I wrote an article on Gogol, I thought of going into gold mining, and was planning to get spliced –

where there's life, there's temptation, and *she* had already said yes, even though she came from a house where she lived in the lap of luxury. I was even about to borrow a pair of shoes to wear for the wedding ceremony, seeing as mine were full of holes for the past year and a half… But it all fell through. She married a schoolteacher, while I went to work in an office, not a commercial office, you understand, but just simply an office. Well, it was soon clear I was on the wrong tack. Years rolled by, and now, though I'm not in regular service, I rake in enough – I pocket bribes without ruth, but stick to truth. I'm tough when the going's good, but when it gets rough – I chicken and bluff. I've my own code though. I know, for instance, you can't take on everybody single-handed, and I keep my nose clean. My line of business is more in the way of uncovering things… if you follow my meaning?"

"What are you, a private eye or something?"

"No, I wouldn't put it quite that way, but I do have a few irons in the fire, some of them official, others – of the personal kind. You see, Vanya, it's like this – I drink vodka. But as I've never done so to excess, I know the score. My time's past, you can't make a leopard change his spots. I'll say one thing, if the human spark were already dead in me, I wouldn't have approached you today, Vanya. You were right, I did see you before; many's the time I wanted to come up to you, but couldn't pluck up the courage and kept procrastinating. I'm not worthy of you. And you were perfectly right to say that if I did approach you, it was because I had a few. But as all this is complete and utter rubbish, enough said about me! Let's talk about you instead. Well, me old pal, me old beauty, I have read it! Indeed I have! I'm talking, my friend, about your first-born baby. And the minute I read it, I was within an ace of turning into a decent person! Within an ace. But then I thought on it and preferred to stay the way I was. Yes, sir…"

And so he went on for some considerable time. He was getting steadily more drunk and maudlin. Masloboyev had always been a fine fellow, level-headed but rather too clever by half; sly, astute, devious and a scallywag from his school days, but deep down quite a softie – a lost soul. There are many such amongst the Russians. They're often endowed with considerable talent, but somehow they always end up barking up the wrong tree, on top of which they are capable of acting

deliberately against their own conscience, out of a lack of gumption in certain respects, and not only do they always come to grief, but they know in advance they're on a hiding to nothing. Incidentally, drink proved to be Masloboyev's undoing eventually.

"Now let me tell you something else, my friend," he continued. "I heard you being lauded to the skies first, then I read some critical reviews about you (of course I did – you thought I'd given up reading altogether, did you?), then I met you in muddy shoes, no galoshes, down at heel, tattered hat, and I put two and two together. You've gone into journalism now, am I right?"

"I have, Masloboyev."

"That means you've hit rock bottom?"

"Looks like it."

"Well, in that case, this is what I'm going to say to you, my friend – *in vino veritas*! I get sloshed, I lie myself down on my sofa (I've a really comfortable, well-sprung one) and fancy myself a Homer or a Dante or some kind of a Frederick Barbarossa* – there's no end of things one can imagine. Whereas you can't fancy you're Dante or Frederick Barbarossa, first because you want to be your own self, and secondly, because you're not meant to have any higher aspirations, you're a workhorse. With me it's imagination, with you it's reality. So then, listen carefully and listen good – pal to pal (otherwise you'll offend and hurt me for the next ten years) – do you need money? I've got enough. Stop pulling faces! Let me give you some, you can settle up with your publishers, throw off your shackles, keep enough to live on for a whole year and then go for it, boy, get stuck into that magnum opus of yours! Eh? What say you?"

"Listen, Masloboyev! I appreciate your friendly offer, but I can't say anything just now, and if you're wondering why – it's a long story. There are reasons. But I promise to tell you everything later – pal to pal. Thanks again for the offer – I promise to come to see you, and to come often. But there is one thing – seeing as you've been open with me, let me pick your brains, the more so since you're a dab hand in these matters."

And I told him the whole of the story about Smith and his granddaughter, starting with the coffee house. Strangely enough, as I

was talking, I could see by his eyes that he knew something of the matter already. I asked him about this outright.

"No, it's not that," he replied. "Come to think of it though, I did hear about this fellow Smith dying in a coffee house. As for Madam Bubnova, I certainly know something about her. I took a backhander from that lady two months ago. *Je prends mon bien où je le trouve*,* as Molière would say, and that's where the resemblance ends. But even though I screwed a hundred roubles out of her, I promised myself there and then to make it five hundred next time. A nasty piece of work she is! Mixed up in all kinds of shady business. You could just about turn a blind eye to that, but sometimes she really overdoes it. Please don't take me for some kind of a Don Quixote. The point is, I stand to make quite a bit on this, and when I ran into Sizobryukhov half an hour ago, it was just what I needed. Obviously it was fatso who brought Sizobryukhov along, and as I know the sort of things he gets up to, I draw my own conclusions… Well, he's not going to get away now! I'm glad you told me about this little girl. I can now follow up another lead. You see, my friend, I take on various private assignments, and the people I get to know!… I was recently investigating a little matter for a certain prince, and bless my soul – what a business that turned out to be, never would I have thought it of that gentleman. Or, if you want, I could tell you another story about this married couple. You just stick with me, my friend, because I've got such stories for you that, were you to write them down, they'd all gasp—"

"What's the prince's name?" I interrupted him, sensing something.

"What's that to you? If you insist – Valkovsky."

"Pyotr?"

"That's him. You know him?"

"I do, but not very well. Well, Masloboyev, you can be quite sure I'll look you up again, if only because of that gentleman," I said, rising. "You've intrigued me no end."

"There now, you're an old friend, come and see me as often as you like. I'm good at telling stories, within limits, of course – you get my meaning? Else one can lose one's reputation and credibility, professional one that is – well and all the rest of it."

"I'll leave it to your discretion."

I was rather excited. He noticed it.

"Well, what can you say about the story I just told you? Can you suggest anything or not?"

"Your story? Hang on a minute – I'll go and settle up."

He went over to the bar and, quite as though by chance, suddenly found himself standing next to the fellow in the frock coat, going by the name of Mitroshka. It struck me that Masloboyev knew him rather better than he had led me to believe. At least it was obvious that this was not the first time the two of them had met. Mitroshka was quite a striking fellow to look at. In his frock coat and a red silk shirt, with his sharp but handsome rather youthful features, his swarthy complexion and bold sparkling eyes, he attracted attention that was not at all unfavourable. He had a jaunty cavalier air about him, though at the given moment he appeared to be holding himself in check in an attempt to cut as far as possible an extremely businesslike, respectable figure.

"Look here, Vanya," Masloboyev said after he returned, "why don't you drop in at my place tonight at seven, you never know, I might just be able to tell you something. By myself, you see, I count for very little. Times were I did, but now I'm just a boozer and no longer in touch with things. But I have my contacts from the past. I can make one or two enquiries, sniff around amongst some dandy people. I'm good at that. True, in my free time – I mean, when I'm sober – I can see a job through on my own too, but generally with a bit of outside help… mostly in the investigative line… Still, what the hell! Enough said… Here's my address: Shestilavochnaya Street. And now, my friend, I'm fit for nothing. One more stiff one down the hatch and I'm off home. Have a lie-down. If you come, I'll introduce you to Alexandra Semyonovna, and if there's time, we can have a chat about poetry."

"What about the other matter?"

"Well, that too, perhaps."

"All right then, I'll be there. I definitely will…"

6

ANNA ANDREYEVNA HAD ALREADY been waiting for me a long time. What I had told her yesterday about Natasha's note had strongly aroused her curiosity, and she'd been expecting me much earlier in the morning, at about ten at the latest. When, however, I turned up after one in the afternoon, the poor lady's anxiety had reached fever pitch. Besides, she was dying to inform me of the latest hopes that she'd been cherishing since the previous day, and of Nikolai Sergeich, who had been poorly and quite out of sorts since then too, and yet at the same time somehow unusually considerate with her. When I turned up, she greeted me with a vexed and cold demeanour, was tight-lipped and betrayed no curiosity whatever, as if to say, "Why've you come? Couldn't you have stayed away for a change, young fellow?" She was angry at my being late. But I was in a hurry and therefore without any further ado I recounted to her the whole of yesterday's scene at Natasha's. As soon as the kind old lady heard about the Prince's visit and his solemn proposal, she immediately shed all her feigned malaise. Words fail me to describe her exultation; she was all of a flutter, she crossed herself, she cried, she made obeisance in front of the icons, she hugged me and wanted immediately to rush to Nikolai Sergeich and announce the reason for her joy to him.

"Have a heart, my dear, it's all because of the various humiliations and insults all round that he's indisposed, but when he finds out that Natasha has received full satisfaction, he'll forget everything in a trice."

It was as much as I could do to dissuade her. The good lady, in spite of having lived with her husband twenty-five years, still knew him only

imperfectly. She was also terribly eager to go with me to see Natasha. I put it to her that Nikolai Sergeich might not only not approve of her action, but that we might thereby damage the whole cause. Reluctantly she changed her mind, but detained me for a further half-hour, and never stopped talking the whole time. "Who's going to keep me company now?" she kept saying. "Such good fortune, and to be stuck all on my own within these four walls!" At last I persuaded her to let me go, having explained that Natasha must be worried sick waiting for me. Anna Andreyevna made the sign of the cross over me several times for the journey, sent a special blessing to Natasha, and nearly burst into tears after I categorically refused to come again that same evening, unless something out of the ordinary had happened to Natasha. I didn't see Nikolai Sergeich on that occasion. He hadn't slept all night, complained of a headache and the shivers, and was at the time fast asleep in his study.

Natasha too had spent the whole morning waiting for me. When I entered, she was pacing up and down as was her wont, her arms folded, and immersed in thought. Even now, when I think of her, I invariably picture her always alone in a sparsely furnished little room, pensive, forlorn, waiting, arms folded, eyes to the ground, pacing aimlessly up and down.

Without stopping, she asked me softly why I was so late. I told her all my adventures in brief, but she hardly listened to me. It was clear she was deeply preoccupied with something. "What's new?" I asked. "Nothing new," she replied, but with a look that immediately told me there was, and that she had been waiting to tell me all about it, though, as was her habit, not immediately, but just before I was about to leave. That's how it always was with us. I had already got used to her ways and waited.

Naturally we started our conversation by talking about the previous evening. I was especially struck by the fact that we were completely at one as regards our opinion of the Prince senior – she now positively disliked him, even more than she had done the night before. And when we started going through the whole of his visit point by point, Natasha suddenly said, "Listen, Vanya, doesn't it always happen that if you take

a dislike to a person on sight, it's almost a sure sign that you'll get to like him later. At least that's how it has always been with me."

"Let's hope so, Natasha. Anyway, here's my opinion for what it's worth – I've weighed everything up and concluded that the Prince may perhaps have been dissembling, but his consent to your marriage was serious and honest enough."

Natasha stopped in the middle of the room and looked hard at me; her whole face became transformed – even her lips gave a slight twitch.

"Would he have dissembled in *such* a matter and… lied?" she asked in proud dismay.

"Precisely!" I hastened to agree.

"Of course, he didn't lie. It seems to me it's not even worth thinking about. There couldn't possibly be any grounds for deceit. And, come to that, what would I have to be in his eyes, to be trifled with so? Could a person really be capable of causing such an affront?"

"Quite so, quite so!" I assured her, but the thought went through my mind, "That's probably the very thing you're thinking about as you pace up and down the room, you poor thing, and perhaps you're even more suspicious than me."

"Oh, I really wish he'd return soon!" she said. "He was going to spend the whole evening with me, and then… there must have been something urgent for him to have thrown everything aside and left. You wouldn't happen to know what it was, Vanya, would you? Have you heard anything?"

"God knows what he's up to. All he wants is to make money. I heard he's got a stake in some government contract here in St Petersburg. You and I, Natasha, have no head for business matters."

"True enough, we haven't. Alyosha mentioned some kind of a letter last night."

"Some piece of news or other. Was Alyosha here?"

"He was."

"Early?"

"At twelve o'clock – you know, he likes to lie in. He stayed for a while. I made him go to Katerina Fyodorovna. There was nothing else I could do, Vanya."

"Didn't he want to go there himself?"

"Yes, he did…"

She was about to add something else, but stopped. I looked at her and waited. Her face was sad. I would have pursued the matter, but she sometimes hated being questioned.

"He's a strange lad," she said at last, screwing up her mouth a little and trying hard not to look at me.

"Why is that? Has something happened between you two?"

"No, nothing. Just… Actually he was very sweet… Only…"

"Well, all his woes and troubles are at an end now," I said.

Natasha looked long and hard at me. She might well have wanted to reply, "Not that he had all that many woes and troubles before," but having in all probability guessed that I was thinking the same thing, she pouted.

However, she was immediately back to being her amiable and gracious self. On this occasion she was extremely subdued. I spent more than an hour with her. She was very agitated. The Prince made her feel uneasy. Listening to some of her questions, I could tell she was very keen to establish what kind of an impression she had made on him the previous night. Had she conducted herself correctly? Had she not been too eager to demonstrate her joy to him? Had she not been too quick to take offence? Or, on the contrary, too condescending? Would he think any the worse of her? Would he not ridicule her, or feel contemptuous of her?… The very thought made her cheeks burn.

"How much can one fret over what a disagreeable person might think? Let him think!" I said.

"Why is he disagreeable?"

Natasha was mistrustful, but pure of heart and artless. Her mistrust derived from an untainted source. She was proud, staunchly proud, and could not abide if what she esteemed above all else were subjected to ridicule before her very eyes. Contempt from an unworthy person would of course have been met with like contempt, and yet her heart would have bled to see her shrine desecrated, no matter at whose hands. Nor was this the result of a lack of fortitude. It came about partly due to an inadequate knowledge of the world, inexperience of people, a sheltered life. She had spent her life immersed in her own little world, hardly venturing outside. And finally, the tendency, characteristic of all

the most kind-hearted of people, inherited perhaps from her father – to shower a person with praise, to try and make him out to be better than he actually was, recklessly to exaggerate all that's best in him – was very pronounced in her indeed. It is difficult for such people eventually to bear the pangs of disillusionment; the more so if they realize they have only themselves to blame. Why did one always expect more than could be delivered? The result is that such people suffer disillusionment over and over again. The best thing for such people is to remain safely secluded within their own four walls and never to venture into the wider world; I have noticed that they can get so fond of their cages that they're liable to lose all social graces in them. To be sure, Natasha had endured many misfortunes, many insults. She was already an afflicted creature, and she must not be reproached, that is, if there were any reproach in my words.

But I was in a hurry and got up to leave. She was surprised and nearly burst into tears that I was going, although all the time I was with her, she did not show me any particular tenderness, quite the contrary; in fact, she seemed even to treat me more coldly than usual. She gave me a burning kiss and looked long and hard into my eyes.

"Listen, Alyosha was so very funny today, he quite surprised me. He was very nice, very happy by all appearances, the way he flounced in, so full of himself, stood and admired himself in front of the mirror all the time. He seems altogether too off hand these days… besides, he only stayed a short while. Imagine, he brought me sweets!"

"Sweets? What can I say, it's very nice and ingenuous of him. My word, what a pair you two are! Now you'll be forever watching each other, snooping, spying, studying each other's faces, looking to read secret thoughts in them, and not have a clue what on earth it's all about! I could just about excuse him. He's happy-go-lucky and immature as ever. But as for you, you!"

And whenever Natasha changed her tone and approached me either with a complaint against Alyosha or to resolve some awkward misunderstandings, or with some secret or wish that I was meant to discern even before it was articulated, she would always look at me, and, as I remember, bite her lip as though imploring me to reach a decision that would immediately ease her heart. But I remember too

that on such occasions I would somehow always assume a harsh and peremptory tone of voice, as if I were upbraiding someone, and this would come to me quite spontaneously, the effect never falling short of the mark. My harshness and pompousness would be appropriate, would lend me an air of authority, for, let's face it, a person will sometimes experience an irresistible craving to be hauled over the coals. Be that as it may, Natasha at times came away from me quite comforted.

"No, you see, Vanya," she continued, one of her hands resting on my shoulder, the other clutching my hand and her eyes staring into mine, anxious to please, "It struck me he was taking things for granted… he seemed like a husband already – you know, like someone who'd already been married ten years and yet was still paying court to his wife. Wasn't it a little premature?… He kept laughing, fidgeting, but as though it was all just by the by, as though I was only partially involved, not at all as before… He was in a great hurry to go to Katerina Fyodorovna's… I'd start saying something, and he'd be miles away or he'd be on about something else altogether – you know, this awful habit of his that we've both tried to get him out of. In a word, he was so… it seemed, unconcerned… But there I go again! Once I start, there's no stopping me! Oh, how demanding we all are, Vanya, what capricious despots we are! It's only now that I see it! Even a simple change in a person's face we can't let go unchallenged, and God knows he could have had any number of reasons for the change! You were right, Vanya, for censuring me just now! It's I alone who am to blame for everything! We create our own misfortunes and then feel sorry for ourselves… Thank you, Vanya, you have completely put my mind at rest. Oh, if only he'd come today! Dear me! I hope he won't be upset for what happened before."

"What, have you quarrelled already!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Not at all! Only I felt a little sad; as for him, from being cheerful, he changed to thoughtful, and was rather distant at parting. I'll send for him… Why don't you come too, Vanya?"

"I will, only I'm afraid something might hold me up."

"Now what? What something?"

"Something I brought upon myself! On second thoughts, I definitely will come."

7

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK SHARP I was at Masloboyev's. He lived on Shestilavochnaya Street, in the wing of a small house in a rather untidy, but fairly expensively furnished, three-roomed apartment. There was evidence of some affluence and at the same time extreme disorderliness. The door was opened by a very pretty girl of about nineteen with soft, lively eyes, and very simply but neatly dressed. I guessed immediately that this was the very same Alexandra Semyonovna whom he mentioned in passing the previous day, inviting me to get to know her. She asked me who I was and, hearing my name, said that he was expecting me, but was asleep in his room, where she presently took me. Masloboyev was sleeping on a splendid, well-sprung sofa, covered with his grimy overcoat, with a frayed leather cushion under his head. He was a very light sleeper; no sooner had we entered the room than he immediately greeted me by name.

"Ah! Is that you? I've been expecting you. I dreamt you had arrived and were trying to wake me up. It's time then. Let's go."

"Go where?"

"To see a lady."

"What lady? What for?"

"Madam Bubnova, to see the colour of her money. Isn't she a beauty!" he drooled, addressing Alexandra Semyonovna and even kissed the tips of his fingers at the memory of Madam Bubnova.

"Get away, you fibber, you!" Alexandra Semyonovna said, considering it obligatory to betray a little pique.

"You don't know each other? May I introduce you? This, Alexandra Semyonovna, is a literary general. Only once a year can he be inspected for free, the rest of the time you have to pay."

"You think I'm a fool, don't you. Don't listen to him, please, he teases me all the time. Fancy making out this gentleman's a general!"

"And a very special kind at that, I tell you. As for you, Your Excellency, don't imagine we're so stupid. We're much more clued up than we would care to let on."

"Don't listen to him! He loves to embarrass me in front of respectable people. There's not an ounce of shame in him. Can't even take me to the theatre once in a while, can you?"

"Alexandra Semyonovna, cherish thy hearth and home… Have you forgotten how else you can put it? Have you not forgotten the little word? The one I taught you?"

"Of course, I haven't. It probably means some nonsense."

"Well, what was that word again?"

"Not in front of guests. It's probably something indecent. I'd rather die."

"So you've forgotten it?"

"No I haven't. *Penates!*[*] Cherish thy *penates…* whatever next! Perhaps there's no such thing as *penates*. And why should they be cherished? He's just fibbing!"

"But then at Madam Bubnova's…"

"I'm sick of your Bubnova!" and Alexandra Semyonovna rushed out in high dudgeon.

"We must go! Come on! Goodbye, Alexandra Semyonovna!"

We left.

"Look here, Vanya, let's begin by taking this cab. Good! Now, after I left you yesterday I found out one or two things, and not by guesswork either, but for certain. I spent an hour on Vasìlevsky Island. That fat-guts is a real bastard, a filthy nasty foul-mouthed pervert. As for Bubnova, her misdeeds have already earned her a record in this town. The other day she nearly got nabbed over a girl from a decent home. Those cotton dresses she was tarting the orphan up in – the one you were telling me about yesterday – made me see red. You see I'd already heard something like it before. Just recently I came across something

else, quite by chance as it happens, but believable for all that. How old's the girl?"

"About thirteen, going by her looks."

"Less, going by her height. Well, that's how she operates. If need be, she'll say eleven, else fifteen. And as the poor thing has no protection, no family, then…"

"Really?"

"What did you think? Madam Bubnova wouldn't take an orphan in just out of the goodness of her heart, that's for sure. And if fat-guts has started turning up there, that's it. He went to see her the other morning. And as for that idiot Sizobryukhov, they've lined up a charmer for him for today, an officer's wife who works as a clerk. Merchants' sons out on the town are funny that way – rank and standing always matter. As in Latin grammar, remember – ending before meaning. Hell, I think I'm still drunk from the night before. But I won't have Bubnova getting in on the act. She's after bamboozling the police too, but not so fast, my lady! That's why I'll give her a bit of a scare because she knows I've a thing or two on her from the past… and all that – you understand?"

I was flabbergasted. All these revelations perturbed me. I was still worried we'd be late, and urged the driver to go faster.

"Don't worry, everything's been taken care of," Masloboyev said. "Mitroshka's there already. Sizobryukhov will pay him in cash, and the fat rogue – in kind. That's all been agreed upon already. As for Bubnova, I'll see to her myself… She really ought to watch her step…"

We arrived and stopped at the restaurant, but the man going by the name of Mitroshka wasn't there. The driver was told to wait outside, and we headed for Bubnova's. Mitroshka was waiting for us at the gate. There were bright lights in the windows and Sizobryukhov's strident drunken laughter resounded from within.

"They've all been there for the past quarter of an hour," Mitroshka informed us. "Now's the best time."

"But how do we get in?" I asked.

"As visitors," Masloboyev answered. "She knows me, and she knows Mitroshka too. Everything's barred and bolted, only not for the likes of us."

He tapped softly on the gate and it was opened immediately by the caretaker with whom Mitroshka exchanged knowing glances. We entered softly; no one heard us in the house. The caretaker took us up a flight of steps and knocked. A voice responded from within. He replied that he was on his own: "Something's up." The door was opened and we all entered together. The caretaker vanished.

"Ay, who's that?" Bubnova exclaimed, drunk and dishevelled, standing in the tiny entrance hall with a candle in her hand.

"Who?" Masloboyev repeated. "Shame on you, Anna Trifonovna, not to recognize your dear visitors! It's us, who else?… Filip Filipych."

"Ah, Filip Filipych! It's you?… What a lovely surprise… I must say… I… well I never… this way, please."

She was in a total flap.

"What, here? It's screened off here… No, you show us somewhere nicer. We'll have some of your chilled stuff too – and you wouldn't happen to have any little mam'zelles about, hey what?"

The woman perked up at once.

"For such important visitors I'll go to the end of the world to oblige them, to China and back if you please."

"A word in your ear, Anna Trifonovna, my darling – is Sizobryukhov here?"

"Y… yes."

"He's the one I'm after. Fancy throwing a party without me, what a rogue!"

"He hasn't forgotten about you, honestly. He's been expecting someone all the time – must be you."

Masloboyev kicked the door open and we found ourselves in a medium-sized room with two windows, geraniums, wickerwork chairs and a battered old upright piano; all true to form. But just before we entered, even while we were talking in the entrance hall, Mitroshka was no longer to be seen. I later discovered that he never went in at all, but had waited outside. There was someone to open the door for him later. It was the dishevelled and brightly rouged young woman who had been peering over Bubnova's shoulder the other morning, and who happened to be his friend.

Sizobryukhov was seated on a flimsy, mahogany-colour settee in front of a round table spread over with a tablecloth. On the table stood two bottles of lukewarm champagne and a bottle of cheap rum; there were plates with boiled sweets, honey cakes and three varieties of nuts. At the table, facing Sizobryukhov, sat a loathsome pockmarked woman of about forty in a black taffeta dress, wearing bronze bracelets and brooches. This was the officer's wife, by all appearances a fake. Sizobryukhov was drunk and very pleased with himself. His fat companion was not with him.

"So that's what people get up to!" Masloboyev roared. "Fancy inviting me to Dussot's then!"

"Filip Filipych, what a pleasure!" Sizobryukhov muttered, his face beaming as he rose to greet us.

"Knocking it back, eh?"

"My apologies."

"No need for that, just see to your visitors. We've come for a bit of a knees-up with you. I've brought someone with me – a friend!" Masloboyev pointed at me.

"Such pleasure, I'm sure… Hehe!"

"Look, is this meant to be champagne? More like sour cabbage soup."

"My apologies."

"I don't suppose you'd dare show your face at Dussot's. Fancy inviting me along then."

"Just now he was telling us he'd been to Paris," the officer's wife chipped in, "all lies, I'm sure!"

"Fedosya Titishna, don't embarrass me. I have been. I was there."

"The likes of you, in Paris?"

"Indeed. Truly so. Karp Vasilych and I distinguished ourselves there. You do know Karp Vasilych, don't you?"

"Why would I know your Karp Vasilych?"

"No reason… socially, perhaps. He and I in a Paris suburb, at Madame Joubert's, smashed an English cheval glass."

"A what?"

"A cheval glass. A mirror, the whole height of the wall, reached up to the ceiling, and what with Karp Vasilych so drunk he spoke Russian to Madame Joubert. He was stood by this mirror, when he leant against

it. Joubert yells out (in her own tongue, that is), 'My mirror's worth seven hundred francs (crowns to us), you'll break it!' He smirks and looks at me. There's me sat on the sofa opposite with my gorgeous one – not like that eyesore over there, but a real knockout, I tell you. He yells out, 'Stepan Terentych, I say, Stepan Terentych! Go halves, shall we?' And I says, 'Right you are!' He just goes smack with his bunch of fives straight into it – ping! Splinters everywhere. Joubert hits the roof, goes for him tooth and claw, 'You pig, where do you think you are?' (in her own tongue, that is). And he says to her, 'Look here, Madame Joubert, take this money and let me have my way,' and he dealt her out six hundred and fifty francs on the spot. We managed to knock her down fifty."

Just at that moment there was a terrible, piercing shriek from somewhere behind several sets of doors, two or three rooms away from where we were. I started and cried out too. I recognized the voice. It was Yelena's. This piteous cry was immediately followed by more screams, oaths, then a scuffle ending finally in a series of sharp, resounding, unmistakable slaps with the flat of a hand across a face. That was probably Mitroshka settling his own scores. The door suddenly burst open violently and Yelena rushed into the room, pale, bleary-eyed, in a white, completely torn and rumpled cotton shift, her hair combed but tousled as though in a struggle. I stood in front of the door as she rushed straight towards me and flung her arms around me. Everyone sprang to his feet, everyone was in a state of turmoil. Her appearance was greeted with screaming and screeching. Hard on her heels, Mitroshka appeared in the doorway, dragging by the hair his fat foe, who was in a most disorderly state. He hauled him across the threshold and hurled him into the room.

"Here he is! Take him!" Mitroshka said, well pleased with himself.

"Listen," Masloboyev said, approaching me calmly and tapping me on the shoulder, "get the cab, take the girl and go home, there's nothing more for you to do here. We'll see to the rest tomorrow."

I didn't need to be told twice. Grabbing Yelena by her hand, I led her out of that den. I've no idea how it all ended there. No one stopped us – Madam was in a state of shock. Everything happened so quickly, she

had no chance to intervene. The driver was waiting for us, and in twenty minutes we were already back at my place.

Yelena was more dead than alive. I undid the hooks of her dress, bathed her brow with water and laid her on the settee. She was flushed and looked as if she were sickening for a fever. I looked at her pallid little face, her bloodless lips, her black hair, combed out in neat strands and perfumed, but now all tousled to one side, at her whole attire, at those pink bows, which had still survived here and there on her dress – and realized the full extent of this nasty business. Poor thing! She was becoming progressively worse. I stayed by her and decided not to go to Natasha's that night. From time to time Yelena would raise her long eyelashes and cast me an intent, lingering glance, as though recognizing me for the first time. It was late, past midnight, when she fell asleep. I lay myself down to sleep beside her on the floor.

8

I GOT UP VERY EARLY. All through the night I kept waking up almost every half-hour to approach my poor visitor and look at her carefully. She had a fever and was slightly delirious. But towards the morning she fell into a deep sleep. A good sign, I thought, but having woken up in the morning, I decided, while the poor child was still asleep, to fetch the doctor. I knew one, a good-natured old bachelor, who had from time immemorial been living with his German housekeeper on Vladimirsky Square. It was to him that I went. He promised to be at my place by ten o'clock. It was eight when I arrived at his house. I was dying to drop in on Masloboyev's on the way but I thought better of it. He would probably still be asleep after the day before, and besides, Yelena could easily wake up and take fright on finding herself alone in my room. In her feverish state she might well not remember how she got there.

She woke just as I was entering the room. I approached her and enquired gently how she was feeling. She did not reply, but looked at me long and intently with her dark, expressive eyes. The look in her eyes told me that she probably understood and recollected everything. She did not answer, perhaps from habit. Yesterday, just like the day she came to see me, she would not say a single word in response to a number of my questions, but would merely fix me with a long, stubborn gaze, in which, together with consternation and wild curiosity, there was some kind of a strange expression of pride. Now I noticed a hardness in her look and, it seemed, even mistrust. I put my hand on her forehead to feel if she had a fever, but without a word and in complete silence,

she brushed it aside with her own thin hand and turned away from me to face the wall. I drew away so as not to disturb her.

I had a large brass tea kettle. I had been using it from way back instead of a samovar and to boil water in. The caretaker kept me stocked up with firewood, delivering at least a five days' supply at a time. I lit a fire in the stove, fetched some water and put the kettle on. On the table I arranged my tea service. Yelena turned towards me and kept watching everything with curiosity. I asked if she wanted anything. But she again turned away from me without a word.

"Why should she be angry with me?" I thought. "Strange girl."

My old doctor arrived as promised at ten o'clock. He examined the patient with his wonted German thoroughness and reassured me enormously by saying that though there was some feverishness, she was in no imminent danger. He added that she was probably suffering from another, chronic condition, something like an irregular heartbeat, but that that would require detailed investigation, whereas for the time being she was out of danger. He prescribed a mixture and some kind of powders, more as a matter of form than necessity, and immediately began to question how she came to be with me. At the same time he kept looking round my room with great bemusement. The old fellow was an awful chatterbox.

Yelena, however, astonished him; she withdrew her hand from his when he was checking her pulse and didn't want to show him her tongue. She wouldn't answer any of his questions, but kept her eyes fixed on his enormous Cross of the St Stanislas Order* that dangled about his neck.

"She probably has a bad headache," the old man observed. "Have you noticed the way she looks?"

I didn't think it necessary to tell him about Yelena and got out of it by saying it was a long story.

"Contact me if necessary," he said as he was leaving. "As for now there's no danger."

I decided to stay with Yelena the whole of that day and, as far as possible, not to leave her on her own until she had fully recovered. But knowing that Natasha and Anna Andreyevna might get anxious as they waited for me in vain, I decided to contact at least Natasha by post, to

say I wasn't coming that day. I couldn't very well write to Anna Andreyevna. She had strictly asked me not to do so after I had on one occasion posted her a message during Natasha's illness. "Nikolai Sergeich frets every time he sees a letter from you," she said to me. "He's dying, bless him, to know what's in it, but can't bring himself to ask. Just moans and groans all day long. Besides, a letter would only make me crave for more. What's the good of a dozen or so lines! I get the urge to go into details, and what with you not being around!…" That was why I wrote only to Natasha and posted the letter on my way to the chemist's with the prescription.

In the meantime Yelena had fallen asleep again. In her sleep she occasionally groaned and shuddered a little. The doctor was right – she had a severe headache. Sometimes she would utter a stifled cry and wake up. Every now and again she cast me a pained look as though my attention was particularly burdensome to her. I have to admit this hurt me very much.

At eleven o'clock Masloboyev arrived. He was preoccupied and somehow distracted; he dropped in only for a minute and was in a great hurry.

"Well, my dear fellow, I knew you wouldn't be living in the lap of luxury," he remarked, looking around, "but honestly I didn't expect to find you in such a shoebox. You call this a room! Well, that's as may be, but the main trouble is all these incidental matters only keep you away from your work. I was thinking about this just yesterday on our way to Bubnova's. You see, old fellow, by nature and by social position I belong to the class of people who themselves contribute nothing useful, but lecture others that they should. Now listen – I might drop in on you tomorrow or the day after; and as for you, be sure you come to see me Sunday morning. By that time I'm hoping everything will be settled with this little girl here. While we're at it, I'll have a good chat with you, because the time's come for you to be taken in hand seriously. You can't go on living like this. I only mentioned it yesterday, now I'm going to spell it out. And tell me another thing: what's so bad about you borrowing some money from me for a time?…"

"Steady on!" I interrupted him. "You'd better tell me instead how it all ended there yesterday."

"Nothing much to tell, it ended in a most civil fashion, mission accomplished, you understand? But I must be off. I only dropped in for a minute to inform you that I'm pressed for time and have more important fish to fry. And incidentally, are you going to place her somewhere or keep her with you? That needs to be thought through and settled."

"I'm not sure yet, and as matter of fact I was going to ask for your advice. For instance, I wonder on what basis would I keep her at my place?"

"Heh, that's easy, as a servant girl if you like…"

"Please keep your voice down. She may be ill, but she's fully alert, and when she saw you, I noticed she appeared to shudder. She seems to remember what happened yesterday…"

Here I told him about her character and everything that I had observed about her. Masloboyev listened with interest. I added that I might place her with some people I knew, and I told him a little about the old couple. To my surprise, he already knew Natasha's story in part, and when I questioned him replied, "I heard about it some time ago in connection with another case. I did tell you, I knew Prince Valkovsky, didn't I? It's good you're thinking of packing her off to the old people. Else she'd only be in your way. One other thing – she'll need some papers. Don't worry about that – leave it to me. Bye, come and see me soon. What is she doing, is she asleep?"

"Looks like it," I replied.

But no sooner had he left than Yelena called me.

"Who was that?" she asked. Her voice shook, but she still regarded me with the same intent and somehow supercilious gaze. That's the only way I can put it.

I mentioned Masloboyev's name and added that it was precisely because of him that we had managed to get her out of Bubnova's clutches, and that Bubnova was very afraid of him. Her cheeks suddenly flushed crimson, probably as her memories flooded back.

"And she is never going to come here, is she?" Yelena asked, looking at me inquisitively.

I hastened to reassure her. She went silent, took my hand in her burning little fingers, but cast it aside immediately, as though shocked

at what she had done. "Was she really so repelled by me?" I thought to myself. "It's just her way, or… or the poor child has seen so much grief, she no longer trusts anyone in the world."

At the appointed hour I went to get the medicine, and at the same time called in at a hostelry I knew, where I occasionally used to have my meals and was allowed credit. Before I left home I took a saucepan with me and bought a portion of chicken broth for Yelena. But she didn't want to eat and the soup was left standing in the oven.

Having given her the medicine, I sat down to work. I thought she had fallen asleep, but when I happened to glance in her direction, I suddenly noticed that she had raised her head and was watching me intently as I wrote. I pretended I hadn't noticed her.

Finally she fell fast asleep – and, to my extreme delight, calmly, without thrashing about or groaning. I was plunged into thought; Natasha, not knowing what had happened, might not only be angry with me for not visiting her today, but would most likely be upset at my neglecting her, especially at a time when she probably needed me most. She might easily have got into some difficulties, or have some matter for me to attend to, and I was simply not at hand.

As regards Anna Andreyevna, I had no idea how I would justify myself to her the next day. I thought and thought and suddenly decided to go and see them both. In all I was likely to be away two hours at the most. As for Yelena, she was asleep and wouldn't hear me go. I jumped to my feet, slung my coat on, took my cap, but just as I was about to leave, Yelena suddenly called me. I was astonished – had she only been pretending to be asleep?

Incidentally, I might add that, though Yelena was apparently reluctant to speak to me, these fairly frequent attempts to catch my attention, this need to turn to me with all her problems, were proof enough to the contrary and, I must admit, I found this rather gratifying.

"Where do you want to send me?" she asked, as I approached her. She had a habit of asking me questions straight out, for which I was quite unprepared. On this occasion it took me quite a while to realize what she meant.

"Just now you were telling your visitor you wanted to place me with some people. I don't want to go anywhere."

I leant across to her – she was all hot and flushed again; she seemed to be once more in a critical state. I began to comfort and console her; I assured her that if she wanted to stay with me, I'd never send her anywhere. While saying this, I took off my cap and coat. I was not prepared to leave her on her own in that condition.

"No, you must go!" she said, realizing immediately that I had decided to stay. "I'm sleepy. I'll soon fall asleep."

"But how are you going to manage on your own?…" I said anxiously. "Of course, I should be back in a couple of hours or so…"

"Well, off you go then. If I was to be ill for a whole year, you wouldn't want to be stuck indoors for a whole year, would you?" and she made as if to smile and looked somehow oddly at me, as though struggling to call forth some emotion of gratitude from the bottom of her heart. The poor thing! Her gentle, loving nature was all too evident, in spite of all her unsociability and apparent animosity.

First I dashed over to Anna Andreyevna's. She had been waiting for me in feverish excitement and greeted me with a host of reprimands, which only served to emphasize her own state of utmost agitation. Nikolai Sergeich had left the house straight after dinner, but where to – no one knew. I had a feeling the old lady had not been able to resist and had told him everything – but, as was her wont, by innuendo. In fact, she admitted as much to me, saying she'd been unable to resist sharing with him such happy tidings, but that Nikolai Sergeich, to quote her own words, "went as dark as a storm cloud, wouldn't say a thing, not even to reply to my questions, and after dinner suddenly got ready and was off…" While recounting this, Anna Andreyevna was fairly shaking with fright and implored me to stay with her and wait for Nikolai Sergeich to return. I managed to extricate myself from such a commitment and told her, almost sharply, that I might not even come the next day, and as a matter of fact that was precisely what I had popped in to warn her about. On this occasion it nearly came to a quarrel between us. She burst into tears, said some very harsh and bitter words to me, and it was not until I was just about to leave that she flung her arms around my neck, hugged me tightly, begged me not to be too hard on her – "orphan" woman that she was – and not take offence at what she had said.

Contrary to expectation, I found Natasha on her own again, and – strange to say – on this occasion it seemed she was not at all as pleased to see me as she had been the day before – or, for that matter, at other times. It was as though I had done her a bad turn or upset her plans. In answer to my question whether Alyosha had been to see her, she replied that of course he had, but not for long. "He promised to come tonight," she added, as though as an afterthought.

"And what about last night?"

"N-no. He got held up," she added hastily. "Well then, Vanya, how are things with you?"

I could see she was anxious to drop the subject and talk about something else. I took a good look at her; she was clearly upset. However, noticing that I was watching her closely and with interest, she cast me a sudden and, it seemed, angry glance, fairly scolding me with her eyes. "She's wretched again," I thought, "only she doesn't want to tell me about it."

In reply to her question about how things were with me, I told her Yelena's story in every detail. She found it fascinating and was somewhat surprised.

"My God! How could you leave her on her own in her state!" she exclaimed.

I explained that I had a mind not to come to her at all that day, but thought she would have been be angry with me if I hadn't, and that there might just be something that needed doing.

"Something that needed doing?" she repeated to herself, turning something over in her mind. "It just so happens there is, Vanya, but best some other time. Have you seen my parents?"

I told her everything.

"Yes. God only knows how father will take all this news. Anyway, what's all the fuss?…"

"Fuss?" I asked. "With such a turn of events!"

"Come, come… so where could he have gone this time? Previously you all thought he'd gone to see me. Look, Vanya, if you can make it, pop in to see me tomorrow. It's just possible I will have something to tell you… Only I'm embarrassed to keep bothering you. As for now,

why don't you go home to your young friend? It must surely be about two hours since you left the house."

"You're right. Goodbye, Natasha. Well, and what did Alyosha have to say for himself today?"

"Not Alyosha again! Nothing much… I wonder you should even ask."

"Au revoir, my darling."

"Goodbye." She shook my hand somewhat casually and averted her face to avoid the farewell eye contact with me. I left her place somewhat puzzled. "On second thoughts," I argued, "she's got enough on her mind. It's no laughing matter. Come tomorrow, though, she'll be the first to tell me everything."

I returned home in low spirits and, as I opened the door, was overcome with astonishment. It was already dark. I could make out that Yelena was sitting on the settee, her head hung down on her chest as though lost in deep thought. She didn't even look up at me, as though in a brown study. I approached her; she was whispering something to herself. "Is she raving?" the thought crossed my mind.

"Yelena, my darling girl, what's the matter with you?" I asked, sitting down beside her and putting my arm around her.

"I don't want to stay here… I'd rather go to her," she said without raising her head.

"Where? To whom?" I asked in surprise.

"To her, to Bubnova. She keeps saying I owe her loads of money and that she buried Mummy at her own expense… I don't want her to blame Mummy, I want to work at her place and pay her everything back… Then I'll go and leave her myself. But now I'm going back to her again."

"Calm down, Yelena, you can't go to her," I said. "She'll torture you to death. She'll finish you off…"

"Let her, let her torture me," Yelena echoed with ardour. "I shan't be the first. Others who are better than me haven't got it any easier. That's what a beggar woman in the street told me once. I'm poor and I want to stay poor. I'll be poor all my life – that's how my mother wanted it when she was dying. I'll work… I don't want to wear this dress…"

"I'll buy you a different one tomorrow, first thing. I'll get you your books too. You'll stay with me. I shan't let anyone take you away, unless you yourself decide to go. Calm down…"

"I'll go and get a job."

"All right, all right! Just settle down, lie down, have a little nap!"

But the poor girl burst into tears. Little by little her tears turned to sobbing. I didn't know what to do with her; I kept bringing her water, mopping her brow and head… Finally she collapsed on the settee in complete exhaustion, and was again overcome by a feverish fit of shaking. I tucked her in whatever came to hand, and she fell into a restless sleep, constantly tossing and turning and waking up with a start. Though I hadn't walked much at all that day, I was nevertheless terribly tired and decided to lie down myself as early as possible. My head was buzzing with cares and worries. I had a feeling I would have lots of problems with this girl. But what worried me most was Natasha and her circumstances. As I recall now, I had rarely been so depressed in spirits as when falling asleep that hapless night.

9

IT WAS LATE, ABOUT TEN IN THE MORNING, when I woke up feeling ill. My head was aching and spinning. I glanced at Yelena's couch – it was empty. At the same instant the sound of someone going over the floor with a broom reached me from the adjoining little room on my right. I got up to investigate. Yelena, broom in one hand and holding up her pretty frock – which she was still wearing since *that* evening – with the other, was sweeping the floor. The firewood, ready for use, was stacked up in a corner; the table was wiped clean, the kettle polished – in a word, Yelena was busy housekeeping.

"Listen, Yelena," I exclaimed, "no one's forcing you to sweep the floor! I don't want you to do it, you're ill. You haven't come here to work, you know!"

"Who's going to sweep the floor then?" she said, straightening up and looking directly at me. "I feel all right now."

"But I haven't brought you here to do work, Yelena. It's as though you're afraid I'm going to pester you, like Bubnova, for not earning your keep. And where on earth did you get that horrible broom from? I didn't have a broom," I added, looking at her in surprise.

"It's my broom. I brought it here myself. I swept the floor for Granddad too. And the broom's been lying here under the stove ever since."

I went back to my room, lost in thought. I could be wrong, but it seemed very much as though my hospitality was weighing upon her and she was making every effort to prove she could earn her keep. "In that case, how hostile she must be deep down!" I thought. A couple of

minutes later she came back into the room and, without a word, resumed her seat on the settee – where she had sat the night before – and took to probing me with her glances. In the meantime I boiled the kettle, made some tea, poured her a cup and offered it to her with a piece of white bread. She took it in submissive silence. She had hardly eaten anything for the last twenty-four hours.

"There now, see what you've done to your pretty frock with the broom," I said, noticing a long smudge across the front of her skirt.

She looked around and suddenly, to my utter surprise, set her cup aside, calmly and deliberately pinched the muslin fabric of her skirt between the fingers of both hands, and with one fell action ripped it clean apart from top to bottom. Then without a word, she raised her eyes and fixed me with an intense, provocative gaze. Her face was pale.

"What are you doing, Yelena?" I exclaimed, convinced that I was looking at a mad thing.

"It's not a pretty frock," she said, gasping with agitation. "Why did you say it was pretty? I don't want to wear it!" she exclaimed suddenly, jumping to her feet. "I'll tear it to shreds. I didn't ask her to dress me in it. She forced me to put it on. I tore up one frock already, I'll tear this one up too! I will! I will!…"

And she fell furiously upon her poor little frock. In a trice she had torn it almost to shreds. When she had done, she was so agitated she could hardly stand on her feet. I looked with surprise on such a display of frenzy. She gazed at me defiantly though, as if I too was in some way to blame. But I already knew what I had to do.

I determined to buy a new frock for her that very morning, without delay. This wild, brutalized creature definitely had to be approached with kindness. She gave the impression she had never even met a kind person in her life. If, braving severe punishment, she had once before torn to shreds her first and similar frock, what must have been her rage now at the sight of this one, which had such terrible associations for her?

On the flea market it was possible to buy a plain pretty frock very cheaply. The only trouble was I was almost completely out of money at that moment. But the night before, as I was going to bed, I had made up my mind to visit a certain place in the morning where I was hoping to

get some, and it just happened to be on the way to the market. I picked up my hat. Yelena was watching me intently as though wary of something.

"Are you going to lock me up again?" she asked, as I reached for the key in order to lock the door behind me, as on the previous day and the day before that.

"My darling girl," I said, approaching her, "don't be angry. I'm locking the door just in case someone comes. After all you're ill and might take fright. Heavens, there's no telling who might come. Supposing Bubnova were to pay you a visit?…"

I said that deliberately. In fact I used to lock her in because I didn't trust her. I had a feeling she might give me the slip. For the time being I decided to err on the side of caution. Yelena was silent, and I locked her in this time too.

I knew a publisher who for the past two years or more had been compiling an anthology in several volumes. I often used to get work from him whenever I needed money urgently. He paid well and on the nail. I went to see him and managed to obtain an advance of twenty-five roubles on the understanding that I would deliver an article within a week. The idea was also to make some free time for work on my novel. I often did this when I was right up against it.

Having obtained the money, I set off for the market, where I soon found an old rag trader I knew. I gave her Yelena's approximate measurements, and in no time at all she handed me a bright cotton frock in excellent condition, laundered hardly more than once and at bargain price. While I was about it I also picked out a neckerchief. As I was settling up, it occurred to me that Yelena would surely need some kind of a fur coat, a small cape or something similar. The weather was cold and she had nothing at all suitable. But I put this purchase off till another time. Yelena was so touchy and proud. God only knows how she would accept this frock, as hard as I tried to choose something as plain and unpretentious as possible – in fact the most ordinary-looking one available. However, I did also end up buying two pairs of cotton stockings and a pair of woollen ones. These I could give her under the pretext that she was ill and it was cold in the room. She also needed some underwear. But I left all that till I got to know her a little better.

Instead, I bought a set of second-hand bed hangings – indispensable items, which Yelena was likely to appreciate greatly.

I returned home with all this at about one o'clock in the afternoon. My front-door lock opened almost without a sound, so that Yelena didn't immediately hear me come in. I noticed that she was standing at my table, going though my books and papers. When she heard me, she quickly shut the book she was reading and moved away from the table, blushing all over. I glanced at the book – it was my first novel, published as a separate volume with my name on the cover.

"Somebody knocked while you were away," she remarked in a mocking tone, as if to say, "What did you have to lock me in for?"

"I wonder if it was the doctor," I said. "Did you answer, Yelena?"

"No."

I left it at that, took the bundle, unpacked it and brought out the frock.

"Here you are, my dear Yelena," I said, approaching her. "You can't go around in rags like you've got on now. I bought you a frock for everyday wear, the cheapest one I could find, so you needn't have any worries. It only cost one rouble twenty. I hope you like it."

I put down the frock beside her. She flushed and for a time looked at me wide-eyed.

She was extremely surprised, and at the same time, it seemed, terribly embarrassed. But a tender and gentle glow appeared in her eyes. On seeing that she was not going to say anything, I turned away towards the table. She clearly couldn't get over what I had done. But she made an effort to control herself and sat, eyes cast down.

My head was aching and spinning more than ever. The fresh air had not done me any good whatsoever. Meanwhile, it was high time to go to Natasha's. My concern for her had not abated since the day before – on the contrary: it had intensified. Suddenly I thought I heard Yelena call out to me. I turned towards her.

"When you go out again, don't lock me in," she said, looking away and with one finger picking the beading of the sofa as if fully engrossed in her task. "I'm not going to run away from you."

"I don't mind, Yelena. But supposing some stranger comes? You never know who it might be!"

"So why don't you leave me the key? I'll simply lock myself in from inside. And if someone knocks, I'll say, 'He's out.'" And she looked at me slyly as though to say, "You see how simple it all is!"

"Who does your laundry?" she asked suddenly, before I managed to reply.

"There's a woman here in the house."

"I can launder clothes. And where did you get the food from yesterday?"

"From an eating house."

"I can cook too. I'll do your meals."

"That'll do, Yelena! What can you cook? None of this is getting us anywhere…"

Yelena went silent and bowed her head. Evidently she was hurt by my remark. At least ten minutes went by; neither of us spoke.

"Soup," she suddenly said, without raising her head.

"What are you talking about? What soup?" I asked in surprise.

"I can cook soup. I made soup for Mummy when she was ill. And I used to go to the market too."

"You see, Yelena; you see how proud you are," I said, approaching her and sitting down next to her on the settee. "I'm trying to be as understanding with you as possible. You're alone now, without your family, destitute. I want to help you. You'd have helped me likewise if I'd been unwell. But you don't want to see it that way, and it stops you accepting even the simplest present from me. All you can immediately think of is getting the money to pay me back, as though I were Bubnova or something and would hold it against you. If that's so, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Yelena."

She did not reply; her lips were quivering. It looked as if she was about to say something, but she took a grip on herself and said nothing. I stood up to go to Natasha's. On this occasion I left Yelena the key, asking her, if someone came and knocked, to call out first to check who was there. I was convinced something untoward had happened to Natasha, and that she was keeping it back from me all this time, as she had already done on a number of previous occasions. At any rate, I decided to look in only for a minute, so as not to irritate her by my solicitude.

That is exactly what happened. She again greeted me with an unwelcoming, sharp expression on her face. I should have left straight away, but my legs were buckling under me.

"I dropped in just for a minute, Natasha," I began, "to see if you could advise me what to do with my little house guest." And I quickly told her everything about Yelena. Natasha listened in silence.

"I don't know what to advise you, Vanya," she replied. "It's pretty evident that she's a very odd creature indeed. Perhaps she's been hurt and unnerved. At least give her time to recover. Do you want my parents to look after her?"

"She keeps saying she won't leave me. Anyway, God only knows if she'll be welcome there, so I really don't know. Well, my dear, how are you? Yesterday you seemed a bit under the weather!" I added hesitantly.

"Yes… I've still got a headache today," she replied absent-mindedly. "Have you seen either of my parents?"

"No. I'm going over tomorrow. You know it's Saturday tomorrow…"

"So what?"

"The Prince is coming in the evening…"

"What of it? I haven't forgotten."

"I just thought I'd mention…"

She stopped directly in front of me and gave me a long hard look. Her gaze exuded a resolve and intransigence that were nevertheless feverish and frantic.

"You know what, Vanya?" she said, "Do me a favour, leave me now; you're only making things worse for me…"

I got up and stared at her in utter bewilderment.

"My dear Natasha! What's the matter with you? What's happened?" I exclaimed in alarm.

"Nothing's happened! You'll find out everything tomorrow, everything, but now I want to be left alone. Do you hear me, Vanya? Just go. I can't bear it, I just can't bear to look at you, Vanya!"

"But at least tell me…"

"You'll find out everything tomorrow, everything! Oh my God! Just go, will you!"

I went out. I was so shocked, I hardly knew what I was doing. Mavra rushed after me into the passage.

"Still angry, is she?" she asked. "I hardly dare go near her."

"What's come over her?"

"Small wonder, it's been more than two days since lover boy has been anywhere near this place!"

"More than two days, you say?" I asked in astonishment. "But yesterday she said herself he'd been here in the morning and wanted to come back the same night…"

"A likely story! He never came in the morning either! I told you, he hasn't shown up for over two days. Did she really tell you he was here in the morning?"

"She did indeed."

"Well," Mavra said thoughtfully, "she must have taken it really badly if she can't admit even to you that he didn't come. We've a right one there, I must say."

"What's going on?" I exclaimed.

"You may well ask. I certainly haven't got the foggiest what to do with her," Mavra continued, spreading out her arms. "She wanted me to go to him yesterday, and twice she called me back. Won't even talk to me today. Couldn't you go and see him? I really daren't leave her now."

I was beside myself as I rushed down the stairs.

"Will you be back by nightfall?" Mavra called out after me.

"We'll see," I replied on my way out. "I might just look in to ask you how things are. That's if I'm still alive myself."

I really felt as though the world was collapsing around my ears.

10

I HEADED STRAIGHT FOR ALYOSHA'S. He was living at his father's place on Malaya Morskaya Street. The Prince had a fairly large apartment, despite the fact that he lived on his own. Alyosha occupied two splendid rooms in this apartment. I had rarely been to see him before – only once if I remember rightly. On the other hand, he used to look in at my place more often, especially at first, during the early stages of his relationship with Natasha.

He was out. I went straight to his rooms and wrote him the following note:

Alyosha, it seems you've gone mad. It was only last Tuesday night that your father personally asked Natasha to do you the honour of becoming your wife – a request you were happy to comply with, as witnessed by myself – and therefore you must surely agree your present behaviour is somewhat odd. Do you realize what you're doing to Natasha? Be that as it may, my note will remind you that your attitude to your wife-to-be is extremely unworthy and inconsiderate. I fully realize that I've no right whatever to preach to you, but I couldn't care less about that.

PS: She knows nothing of this letter, nor was it she who told me about you.

I sealed the note and left it on his table. When questioned, his servant replied that Alexei Petrovich was hardly ever in and that this time too he wasn't expected till early the next day, before sunrise.

I just about managed to stagger home. My head was spinning, my legs were weak and shaking. The door to my room was not locked. In it I found Nikolai Sergeich Ikhmenev waiting for me. He was sitting at the table in silence and looking at Yelena with curiosity, who was staring back at him with no less curiosity and not uttering a word either. "Well, well," I thought to myself, "she must strike him as rather odd."

"There you are, my boy, I've been waiting a whole hour for you and, I must admit, I hadn't expected… to find you like this," he continued, looking around the room and winking furtively at Yelena. His eyes were filled with astonishment. But on looking at him closer, I noticed he was alarmed and dispirited. He was paler in the face than usual.

"Why don't you sit down," he continued with a preoccupied and flustered air, "there's something I wanted to see you about urgently. But what's the matter with you? You look awful."

"I'm not well. I've been feeling dizzy since morning."

"Well, take care, this is no laughing matter. Have you caught a cold?"

"No, it's simply nerves. I get this sometimes. How about you, are you well?"

"Yes, as well as can be! It's just that I'm a bit on edge. I want to talk to you. Why don't you take a seat?"

I moved my chair closer and sat down at the table facing him. Ikhmenev leant across a little and began in a subdued tone, almost a whisper: "Try not to look at her and pretend we're talking about something unimportant. Who's the girl anyway?"

"I'll explain everything later, Nikolai Sergeich. She's a poor little girl, a complete orphan, granddaughter of that same Smith who used to live here and died in the coffee house."

"Ah, so he had a granddaughter too! Well, my friend, she's a funny one and no mistake! All she does is stare! I tell you – if you hadn't come for another five minutes, I couldn't have stood it any longer. It was a job to get her to open the door, and so far not a word out of her. She gives me the creeps – a bit weird, isn't she? So how did she get here? Ah, I get it, probably came to see her granddad, not knowing he was dead."

"Yes. She was very miserable. The old man remembered her before he died."

"Hm! Like granddad, like granddaughter. You'll have to tell me all about it later. Might even be able to help her somehow, in some little way, if she's so destitute… As for now, my boy, couldn't you tell her to leave us alone for a while, because I've a serious matter to discuss with you?"

"But she's got nowhere else to go. She lives here."

I explained the situation to Ikhmenev as best I could in a few words, adding that one could talk in front of her, as she was only a child.

"Well yes… of course, a child. Only, my dear chap, I'm absolutely flabbergasted. She lives with you, does she? God almighty!"

And Ikhmenev glanced at her once more in astonishment. Yelena, sensing that we were talking about her, sat silent, her head bowed, picking with her fingers at the edging of the settee. She had already put on her new frock which turned out to be just right for her. Her hair had been smoothed down with more care than usual, maybe because of the new frock. On the whole, had it not been for the strange wild-eyed obduracy of her gaze, she'd have looked a very comely girl.

"To put it in a nutshell, it's like this, my boy," Ikhmenev began again, "it's a long and serious business…"

He sat, his head bowed, wearing a grave and astute expression on his face, and, in spite of his hurried manner and his "in a nutshell", was unable to find the words to begin his speech. "What next?" I thought to myself.

"You see, Vanya, I've come to ask you for a very big favour. But before that… as I see it, I need to explain certain facts to you… and very tricky they are…"

He cleared his throat and glanced at me; his face flushed. Irritated at his inability to find the right words, he nevertheless pulled himself together. "Well, what's the use beating about the bush! You know what I mean. The long and the short of it is I'm challenging the Prince to a duel and would ask you to see to the arrangements and be my second."

I threw myself back in my chair and stared at him in utter bewilderment.

"Well, what are you staring at! I haven't gone mad, you know."

"But hang on, Nikolai Sergeich! On what grounds, to what end? And if you ask me, how can this possibly?…"

"Grounds! End!" the old man exclaimed. "A fine kettle of fish!…"

"All right, all right, I know what you're going to say. But what would be the good of your extravaganza! How could a duel resolve anything? I have to admit, I don't understand a thing."

"I knew you wouldn't understand anything. Listen, the lawsuit's over. (That is, it will be in the next few days. All that remain are some petty formalities.) I've lost the case. I have to pay ten thousand roubles. That's the judgement of the court. It's all got to come out of Ikhmenevka. Consequently, the villain can count on getting his money, and I, by giving up Ikhmenevka, will have paid my dues and shall be a free agent again. It's at this point I can turn round and say proudly, 'This is how things stand between us, my dear Prince, you've been insulting me for the last two years, you've dragged my name and my family's reputation through the mud, and I had to grin and bear it! I couldn't have challenged you to a duel then, or you'd have just said, "You're a smart one, aren't you? All you want is to kill me to avoid parting with the money that you expect the court will order you to pay me sooner or later! No, let's first see how the trial goes, then you can go ahead and challenge me." My dear Prince, the trial's now over and your money's safe; consequently there are no more obstacles, so would you mind choosing your weapon?' That's the long and the short of it. So, what do you say, am I not at long last entitled to avenge myself for the lot!"

His eyes were flashing. I looked at him in silence for a long time. I wanted to plumb his innermost thoughts.

"Listen, Nikolai Sergeich," I replied at last, determined to get to the heart of the matter or we would never come to an understanding, "can you be perfectly frank with me?"

"I can," he replied resolutely.

"So tell me honestly, is it just vengeance which motivates you to throw down the gauntlet, or have you got some other reasons at the back of your mind?"

"Vanya," he replied, "you know there are certain issues I shan't permit anyone to touch upon when talking to me, but on this occasion I'm

going to make an exception, because you've been astute enough to realize at once that we can't skirt round the matter. Yes, I do have another reason. And it is this – to save my fallen daughter and rescue her from the disaster into which she has been plunged by the latest circumstances."

"But how will you save her with this duel? That's the question."

"By totally queering their pitch. Listen, don't imagine I'm influenced by some kind of paternal affection or suchlike sloppy sentiments. It's all utter nonsense! Nobody knows what goes on in my head, you included. My daughter has left me, she left my home to be with her lover, and I tore her out of my heart, tore her out once and for all, that very evening – do you remember? If you saw me shed tears over her portrait, it doesn't follow that I wish to forgive her. I didn't forgive her then either. I wept for lost happiness, for hope forlorn, but not for *her*, not the way she is now. Perhaps I cry and cry often. I'm not embarrassed to admit it, as I'm not embarrassed to admit that I once loved my child more than anything in the world. All this apparently cuts right across what I'm minded to do at present. You might say to me: if that's so, if you're indifferent to the fate of the girl whom you no longer regard as your daughter, why then do you meddle in what's being plotted there? I reply: first, because I don't want a low and treacherous person to triumph, and second, because of the most ordinary love for a fellow human being. Even if she's no longer my daughter, she's still a weak, vulnerable and deluded creature, who is continually being led astray, even to her final ruination. I cannot intervene in this matter directly – but indirectly, by way of a duel, that's another matter. If I'm killed or my blood is spilt, is she really going to walk across our duelling ground, or perhaps over my dead body, to go to the altar with the son of my murderer – like the daughter of that king* (you remember the book we had that you learnt to read from), who drove her chariot over her father's body? And finally, if it does come to a duel, our two princes won't be so keen for the marriage to go ahead anyway. In a word, I don't want this marriage and shall do everything in my power to prevent it. Do you follow me now?"

"No. If you have Natasha's good at heart, what right do you have to stop the marriage which alone can restore her good name? She's still got all her life ahead of her. She needs her good name."

"To hell with all social conventions, that's how she should argue! She must realize that the greatest ignominy for her lies in this very marriage, this union with these vile people, this contemptible social set. Dignified scorn should be her response to society. Perhaps in that case even I might be persuaded to put my hand out to her, and we'd see who would then dare to offend my child."

Such desperate idealism astonished me. But I immediately realized that he was not himself and spoke in the heat of the moment.

"That is too high-minded," I replied, "and consequently cruel. You demand from her a strength with which you have perhaps not endowed her at birth. And do you really think she is agreeing to this marriage because she wants to become a princess? This is love. This is passion. This is fate. And finally, you expect her to ignore public opinion, while you yourself are only too ready to bow to it. The Prince has offended you, he has publicly accused you of a sordid and dishonest attempt to marry your daughter into his titled family, and this is how your argument now runs: if she herself were to turn down their formal proposal, it would naturally be the most convincing and obvious denial of the slander. That is what you are after, you subscribe to the same view as the Prince, you want him to admit his own mistake. You are anxious to make him look ridiculous, to wreak revenge upon him, and to this end you are ready to sacrifice your daughter's happiness. If that isn't selfishness, I don't know what is!"

Ikhmenev sat for a long time frowning in glum silence.

"You're unfair to me, Vanya," he said at last, and a tear glistened beneath his eyelids, "unfair – I swear to you, but let that pass! I cannot bare my heart before you," he continued, rising from the chair and reaching for his hat. "Just let me say one thing: you mentioned my daughter's happiness just now. I absolutely and categorically have no faith whatever in this happiness, quite apart from the fact that even without my intervention this marriage will never take place."

"Why is that?" I exclaimed with curiosity. "What makes you think so? Perhaps you know something?"

"No, I'm not privy to anything in particular. But that damned fox couldn't have agreed to this matter. There must be something behind it – it's a trap. I'm sure of it and, mark my words, that's how it'll be. Second, even if this marriage were to take place – that is, in accordance with some special, mysterious plan which that scoundrel can profit from and he alone knows anything about, because I certainly don't – then judge for yourself, ask yourself this question: could she find happiness in that marriage? Rebukes, neglect, a mere stripling for a fiancé who's already tiring of her love, but as soon as he marries – the end to all respect, just insults and abuse. Strong passion on her side, gradual cooling-off on his – jealousy, heartache, living hell, divorce, crime itself perhaps… no, Vanya! If that's what's being hatched and what you're aiding and abetting, then, I swear, you'll be answerable before God, but it'll be too late! Goodbye!"

I stopped him.

"Listen, Nikolai Sergeich, let's come to an agreement – let's wait. Rest assured, there are others too who are keeping a close eye on the matter, and perhaps it'll all resolve itself in the best possible manner, of its own accord, without any violent and extraneous interference, such as this duel for instance. Time's the best healer! And lastly, permit me to tell you, your proposal is just not feasible. Did you really think even for a moment that the Prince would accept your challenge?"

"Why shouldn't he? Come now, be sensible!"

"I swear to you, he wouldn't, and believe me, he'd come up with a perfectly adequate excuse. It would be done with every semblance of correctness, but as a result you'd be made a laughing stock…"

"Have a heart, my boy, say no more! This is too much! How could he not accept! No, Vanya, you're simply a dreamer – you are, yes – you don't understand a thing! Are you telling me I'm not a worthy opponent in a duel, or what? I'm no worse than him. I'm an old man, an aggrieved father. You're a Russian man of letters, therefore also perfectly respectable and well suited to be a second and… and… I've no idea what more you want…"

"You'll see. He'll come up with such excuses that you'll be the first to agree that duelling with him is totally out of the question.

"Hm… all right, my boy, have it your way! I'll grin and bear it, for the time being, of course. Let time take its course. But look here, my boy – I want you to give me your word of honour not to reveal our conversation either to them or to Anna Andreyevna."

"Certainly."

"Another thing, Vanya, do me a favour, don't ever bring this matter up with me again."

"All right, I give you my word."

"And, finally, one more thing: I know, my dear chap, you must perhaps be bored to tears at our place, but come and see us more often if you can. My poor Anna Andreyevna loves you so, and… and… she misses you… you understand me, Vanya?"

And he shook my hand firmly. I gave him a hearty promise.

"And now, Vanya, just before I go, one last ticklish matter – are you short of money?"

"Money?" I repeated in surprise.

"Yes," and the old man blushed and lowered his eyes. "This place of yours, my dear chap… the way you live… and when I think that you probably have other additional expenses, now especially, that's why… here, take this, hundred and fifty roubles, to start with…"

"Hundred and fifty roubles, and only *to start with*, after losing your case!"

"Vanya, as I see it, you don't understand me at all! Surely there can be such things as *emergency* needs, you must realize it. Money brings personal independence, freedom of action. Perhaps you don't need it this very minute, but might you not need it for something in the future? Anyway, I'll leave it here with you. It's all I can scrape together. If you don't spend it, you can give it back to me. But goodbye for now! God, how pale you are! My word, you're quite ill…"

I did not object and took the money. It was only too obvious why he was leaving it for me.

"I can barely stand on my feet," I replied.

"You should take care of yourself, Vanya, my dear fellow, you really should! Don't go out today. I'll tell Anna Andreyevna the state you're in. Do you need a doctor? I'll look you up tomorrow – I'll do my best, if I haven't given up the ghost myself that is. Why don't you lie down

for now?… Well, goodbye! Goodbye, young lady! She's turned away! Listen, my boy! Here's another five roubles – it's for the little girl. By the way, I'd rather you didn't tell her I gave it, just go ahead and spend it on her, a pair of shoes or what not, some underwear… there's so many things she might need! Goodbye, my boy!…"

I saw him to the house gate. I had to ask the caretaker to fetch some food. Yelena still hadn't had her tea…

11

BUT AS SOON AS I CAME BACK IN, my head began to spin and I collapsed in the middle of the floor. All I can remember was Yelena's scream – she thrust out her arms and rushed forward to support me. That was the last thing that has survived in my memory…

Later I remember I was already in bed. Yelena told me subsequently that with the caretaker's help, who just then had happened to bring in the food, they had laid me on the settee.

I awoke several times and on each occasion saw Yelena's compassionately solicitous face bending over me. But all this I recall as in a dream, as though through a fog in which the precious image of the poor girl flickered before me as a vision, as a delusion in my state of delirium; she brought me something to drink, she nursed me as I lay there on my couch, or sat by me, sad and frightened, stroking my hair with her little fingers. Once I remember a soft kiss on my cheek. On another occasion, awaking suddenly in the night by the light of a guttering candle placed on a small table that was pulled up against the side of the settee, I saw Yelena sleeping fitfully, her head resting on my pillow, her pale lips half-open and the palm of her hand pressed against her warm cheek. But it was only early in the morning that I awoke properly. The candle had burnt down completely; a bright, pink beam of the approaching dawn was already resplendent on the wall. Yelena was fast asleep in a chair by the table, her tired head resting on her left arm stretched out across the table, and I recall I was lost in admiration of her childish face, fraught even in her sleep with some kind of unchildlike sadness, yet strangely, feverishly beautiful – pallid, with long eyelashes on

emaciated cheeks, framed in jet-black hair tied in a thick, heavy knot, dangling loosely to one side. Her other hand was on my pillow. I ever so gently kissed that delicate hand of hers, but the poor child did not wake up, only a shadow of a smile seemed to flit across her pallid lips. I looked and looked at her and gradually fell into a restful, healing sleep. This time I slept nearly till noon. On waking up I felt almost recuperated. Only a general weakness and stiffness in the joints testified to my recent illness. I had experienced such sudden nervous attacks before, and knew them well. The illness would normally be over almost completely in twenty-four hours, which however did not prevent it incapacitating me totally throughout its duration.

It was nearly midday. The first thing that caught my eye was the hangings which I had bought the previous day strung out on a line in a corner. Yelena had taken things into her own hands and sectioned off a private corner for herself in the room. She was sitting in front of the stove waiting for the kettle to boil. Noticing that I had woken up, she smiled cheerfully and approached me at once.

"My darling girl," I said, taking her by the hand, "you've been looking after me the whole night. I didn't know you were so good."

"How do you know I looked after you? Maybe I slept right through the night?" she asked, looking at me with kindly and bashful mischievousness, blushing demurely as she spoke.

"I kept waking up and saw everything. You fell asleep only just before dawn—"

"Would you like a glass of tea?" she interrupted, as though finding it difficult to pursue the conversation, which happens with all virtuous, unyieldingly honest people whenever one praises them to their face.

"Yes, please," I replied. "But did you have your lunch yesterday?"

"Not lunch, but supper. The caretaker brought it. You shouldn't be speaking though, just lie still. You're not well enough yet," she added, bringing me a glass of tea and sitting down next to me.

"Lie still? I wish I could! On second thoughts, I might do so till dusk, but then I must go out. It can't be helped, Lenochka."

"That's too bad! Who is it you want to go and see? Not your visitor who was here yesterday?"

"No, not him."

"I'm glad it's not him. He upset you. So it's his daughter then?"

"How do you know about his daughter?"

"I heard everything yesterday," she replied, her head lowered. Her face became overcast. She knitted her eyebrows together. "He's a bad old man," she added after a while.

"Why, do you know him? On the contrary, he's a very good man."

"No, no! He's evil. I heard him," she replied, getting agitated.

"So what did you hear?"

"He doesn't want to forgive his daughter…"

"But he loves her. She has done him wrong, but he cares for her, he suffers for her."

"And why doesn't he forgive her? Even if he forgave her, she wouldn't go to him now."

"Why is that? Why not?"

"Because he doesn't deserve to be loved by his daughter," she replied with animation. "I wish she'd leave him for ever and go begging, and he could watch his daughter beg and it would serve him right." Her eyes were flashing, her cheeks glowing.

"She isn't just saying this," I thought to myself.

"Is he the one you wanted me to go and live with?" she added after a pause.

"Yes, Yelena."

"No, I'd rather go and work as a housemaid."

"Oh, what a shame you should be saying such things, Lenochka. And isn't it all very silly? Who do you think would take you?"

"Any man," she replied brusquely, lowering her head still further. She was visibly on edge.

"No man would want a worker like you," I said with a grin.

"A family then."

"With your character?"

"Yes, with mine."

The more irritated she became, the more clipped were her responses.

"You wouldn't survive."

"I would. If they told me off, I'd keep quiet deliberately. If they beat me, I wouldn't make a sound, not a peep. Let them beat me. I wouldn't cry. They'd go mad with anger not to see me cry."

"The things you say, Yelena! There's so much bitterness in you. And you're so proud too! My word, you've been through some hard times!…"

I got up and went over to my desk. Yelena stayed on the settee, looking pensively at the ground and picking at the beading with her little finger. She was silent. "Has she taken exception to what I said?" I wondered.

Standing at the table, I absent-mindedly opened the books I had brought with me yesterday, and little by little became engrossed in reading. This happens a lot with me – I take a book, open it up to make a quick reference, and become so absorbed I forget everything.

"What is it you write all the time?" Yelena enquired with a meek smile, approaching the table noiselessly.

"Nothing much, Lenochka, all kinds of stuff. I get money for it."

"Petitions?"

"No, not petitions." And I explained to her as best I could that I wrote all kind of stories about various people; these go into the making of books which are called novels and tales. She listened with rapt attention.

"And is all you write about true?"

"No, I make things up as I go along."

"Why do you write things that aren't true?"

"Here, read this, look, this one here – you've looked at it before. You can read, can't you?"

"Yes, I can."

"You'll see for yourself. I wrote this book."

"Did you? I'll read it…"

There was something she was dying to tell me, but evidently couldn't bring herself to do so and was all on edge. There was something behind her questions.

"Do you get paid a lot for this?" she asked at last.

"It depends. Sometimes a lot, but sometimes nothing at all, because the work just grinds to a halt. It's a hard graft, Lenochka."

"So you're not rich."

"No, not at all."

"Well then, I'll work and help you…"

She darted me a quick glance, flushed, lowered her eyes and, taking a couple of steps towards me, suddenly flung both her arms around me and pressed her face tightly against my chest. I looked at her in amazement.

"I love you… I'm not proud," she faltered. "You said yesterday I was proud. No, no… I'm not like that… I love you. You're the only one who loves me…"

Tears were choking her. A minute later sobs welled up from her chest as violently as during her seizure the day before. She fell on her knees before me, kissing my hands and feet…

"You love me!…" she kept repeating, "you're the only one, the only one…"

She was convulsively tightening her arms around my knees. All her emotions, held back for so long, suddenly welled up irrepressibly, and I was given a sense of that strange passion chastely held back, only to gush forth the more violently and precipitately the greater the need to find an outlet, a catharsis, culminating in that inevitable outburst when one's whole essence surrenders itself to the need for love, gratitude, tenderness and tears…

Her sobbing ended in hysteria. With some effort I drew her arms apart, which she had tightened round my knees. I lifted her and took her over to the settee. She sobbed for a long while yet, her face stuck in the cushions as though embarrassed to look at me, but clutching my hand tightly in her little one as she held it against her heart.

Little by little she fell silent, but still would not raise her face to me. Once or twice her eyes flitted across my face, and they were overflowing with mellowness and a quailing, reawakened animation. At last she blushed and smiled.

"Are you better, my sensitive Lenochka, my sick little child?" I asked.

"Not Lenochka, no…" she whispered, still hiding her face from me.

"Not Lenochka? What then?"

"Nelly."

"Nelly? Why especially Nelly? I must say, it is a lovely name. I'll call you that if it's what you want."

"That's what Mummy called me… And no one else called me that, ever, except her… And I didn't want anyone to call me that except

Mummy… But it's all right for you. I'd like you to… I'll always love you, always…"

"My proud and loving little heart," I thought, "that it should have taken me so long to earn the right to call you… Nelly." But now I knew that her heart would be devoted to me for ever.

"Nelly, listen," I said as soon as she had calmed down. "You said that it was only your mummy who loved you and no one else. But what about your granddad, did he really not love you?"

"He didn't…"

"But you cried for him. Remember, here, on the stairs?"

She thought for a minute.

"No, he didn't love me… He was evil." And a pained expression crept over her face.

"But you couldn't expect anything else of him, Nelly. I'm sure he was no longer in his right mind. He'd already lost his reason when he died. I did tell you how he died, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it was only in the last month that he became forgetful. He'd sit here a whole day and if I hadn't come to see him, he'd have sat a second and a third day with nothing to eat or drink. But before that he was much better."

"When was that?"

"When Mummy was still alive."

"So, it was you who brought him food and drink, Nelly?"

"Yes."

"Where did you take it from, from Bubnova?"

"No, I never took anything from Bubnova," she said emphatically, with a peculiar tremor in her voice.

"So where did you get it from? I mean, you had nothing of your own, had you?"

Nelly was silent and went terribly pale; then she gave me a long, protracted look.

"I used to go begging in the street… I'd get five kopecks and go and buy him some bread and snuff…"

"And he let you do it! Nelly! Nelly!"

"At first I went on my own without telling him. But when he found out, he forced me into it. I'd be standing on the bridge, asking the

passers-by, while he'd be walking up and down nearby, watching. As soon as he'd see me get something, he'd pounce on me and take the money as if I'd wanted to keep it for myself rather than give it all to him anyway."

Saying this she gave a bitter, caustic smile.

"All this was when Mummy was already dead," she added. "After that he went completely dotty."

"I take it he loved your mummy very much. How is it he didn't live with her?"

"No, he didn't love her… He was evil and wouldn't forgive her… like that other nasty old man yesterday," she said softly, almost in a whisper, growing paler and paler.

I shuddered. The plot of a whole novel flashed before my imagination. A poor woman dying in a coffin-maker's basement; her orphaned daughter occasionally visiting her grandfather who had cursed her mother; a demented eccentric old man breathing his last in a coffee house after the death of his dog!…

"But you know, Azorka used to be Mummy's dog," Nelly said suddenly, smiling at some reminiscence. "Granddad loved Mummy a lot at one time, and when Mummy went away from him, she left Azorka behind. That's just why he loved Azorka so much… He wouldn't forgive Mummy, but when the dog died, so did he," Nelly added sharply, and her smile vanished from her face.

"Nelly, what exactly was he before?" I asked after a pause.

"He was rich before… I don't know what he did," she replied. "He owned some kind of a factory… That's what Mummy told me. She thought at first I was too young to understand and wouldn't tell me everything. She used to cuddle me and say, 'You'll find out everything. Time will come you'll find out, you poor, unfortunate thing!' She kept calling me poor and unfortunate. And when she thought I was asleep in the night – but I wasn't really: I was just pretending – she'd cry and kiss me and say, 'You poor, unfortunate thing'!"

"What did your mummy die of then?"

"Consumption. It must've been six weeks ago."

"And do you remember the time when your granddad was rich?"

"I wasn't even born then. Mummy had left Granddad even before I was born."

"Who with?"

"I don't know," Nelly replied softly and as though lost in thought. "She went abroad, and that's where I was born."

"Abroad? Where?"

"In Switzerland. I've been all over – in Italy and in Paris too."

I was surprised.

"And do you remember it all, Nelly?"

"Most of it."

"How come your Russian is so good, Nelly?"

"My mummy taught me Russian even while we were there. She was Russian, because her mummy was Russian, but Granddad was English – but just like a Russian really. And when we got back here a year and a half ago I learnt it really well. Mummy was already ill by then. Here we became poorer and poorer. Mummy kept on crying. At first she spent a long time looking for Granddad in St Petersburg and kept saying she had wronged him and wouldn't stop crying… She just cried and cried! And when she found out that Granddad was poor, she cried even more. She wrote letters to him often, but he didn't reply."

"So why did your mummy come back here? Just to see your father?"

"I don't know. Over there life was good for us," and Nelly's eyes began to sparkle. "It was just the two of us. She had a friend, he was kind, like you… He got to know her while she was still here. But he died over there, and so Mummy returned…"

"So it was him your mummy went away with when she left your grandfather?"

"No, not with him. Mummy went away with someone else, and he was the one who left her…"

"Who was that, Nelly?"

Nelly looked at me and did not reply. Evidently she knew with whom her mother had gone away and that in all probability he was her father. But she found it distressing to name him even to me…

I did not want to torment her with my questions. Hers was a strange, uneven, volatile temperament, with its excesses held in check, accommodating, yet singularly proud and defensive. All the time that I

knew her she was, in spite of loving me with all her heart – with exalted, pure love, almost the equal of the love she bore for her mother, whose very memory caused her pain – in spite of all that she was seldom completely open with me and, with the exception of that one occasion, rarely felt the need to talk with me about her past, tending on the contrary to shy away from me, if anything rather brusquely. But on that day, in the course of a few hours, amidst the pain and the convulsive sobs which interrupted her story, she revealed to me everything that hurt and troubled her most in her recollections, and never shall I forget that terrible story. But the main part of it is yet to follow…

It was a fearful story indeed: the story of a forsaken woman who had outlived her happiness; sick, anguished and deserted by everybody; rejected by the very person on whom she might have relied – her father, who himself had at one time been offended by her and in his turn been driven to insanity by unbearable suffering and humiliation. It was the story of a mother who had been brought to the brink of despair; who with her little girl, a mere child in her eyes, had tramped the cold, dirty St Petersburg streets, begging for alms; a woman who subsequently lay for months at death's door in a damp basement, her father denying her his blessing and only at the last minute coming to his senses and hurrying to her with words of forgiveness, to arrive all too late and find a cold corpse in place of the one whom he loved above all else in the world. It was a strange story of a mysterious, in many respects barely credible relationship between a demented old man and his little granddaughter, who had fathomed him out thoroughly, mature beyond her years in the comprehension of what to other children, living in more stable and comfortable conditions, would remain a closed book till a much later age. It was a melancholy story, one of those dismal, heart-rending stories which are so often played out unnoticed, almost shrouded in mystery, under the heavy St Petersburg sky, in the dark hidden recesses of that huge city, amid the frenetic hustle and bustle of life with its unfeeling egoism, its conflicting interests, its sordid debauchery, clandestine crime, amidst all the infernally senseless and abnormal conditions of life…

But this story is yet to be told…

Part Three

1

IT WAS EVENING, WELL AFTER DUSK, before I finally managed to shake off my oppressive nightmare and come back to reality.

"Nelly," I said, "you're sick and upset, but unfortunately I have to leave you, distraught though you are and in tears. My precious one! Listen to me carefully, there's someone else dear to me who's been hard done by, full of unrequited love, miserable, insulted and deserted. She's expecting me. In any case, now I've heard your story I'm drawn to her myself so much that if I don't see her now, this very minute, I'll probably not endure it…"

I'm not at all sure Nelly understood me. I was still under the effect of my illness and of her story, but I hurried to Natasha regardless. It was already late, gone eight, when I at last reached her place.

On the street in front of the house where Natasha lived, I noticed a calash, which I took to be the Prince's. The entrance to Natasha's was from the courtyard. As soon as I entered the stairwell, I heard someone a flight above me groping his way up with great care, evidently unfamiliar with the layout. I reckoned it must be the Prince, but I soon began to have my doubts. The stranger who was making his way up was grunting and cursing ever more with each successive step. Of course the staircase was narrow, dirty, steep and abysmally dark, but such expletives as reached me from above I would never have attributed to the Prince. The gentleman ahead of me swore like a trooper. But on the second floor there was a light; a small lamp was burning by Natasha's door. I caught up with the stranger right by the door, and my surprise was all the greater when I recognized the Prince. It looked as though he

was pretty annoyed at my running into him so unexpectedly. For a moment he couldn't place me, but suddenly his whole manner relaxed. His initial angry look of antipathy suddenly melted into a cheerful and friendly demeanour, and he held out both his hands to me with extraordinary delight.

"Oh, it's you! I was just about to go down on my knees to offer thanks to God for having spared my neck. Did you hear me swear?" And he burst into the most endearing laughter. But suddenly his face assumed a grave and concerned look.

"But is this the best Alyosha could find for Natalya Nikolayevna?" he asked, shaking his head. "It's precisely these so-called *trifles* that define the man. I'm worried about him. He's kind, he's got a good heart, but see for yourself – head over heels in love, and all he can do for the one he loves is put her in such a hole. I even heard they sometimes run out of bread," he added in a whisper, groping for the bell handle. "I shudder every time I think of his future, I should say of *Anna* Nikolayevna's future, when she becomes his wife…"

Although he called her by the wrong name, he didn't notice it, and was clearly annoyed at not being able to find the bell. There was no bell. I rattled the handle of the lock, and Mavra immediately opened the door and welcomed us with a preoccupied air. In the kitchen, divided off from the tiny passage by a wooden partition, there were signs, as one looked through the open door, of some former activity. Everything had been wiped and scrubbed clean to an unaccustomed degree; there was a fire in the stove and the crockery on the table looked entirely new. It was evident that we were expected. Mavra rushed to take our coats.

"Is Alyosha here?" I asked.

"No," she whispered somewhat conspiratorially.

We entered Natasha's room. There were no visible signs of any special preparation; everything was as usual. As a matter of fact everything was always so neat and cosy in her room that there would have been no need for any tidying up. Natasha met us at the door. I was astonished by the extreme pallor and wasted look on her face, even though a flush of colour momentarily suffused her wan cheeks. Her eyes were feverish. Palpably ill at ease, flustered and without saying a word, she hurriedly

held out her hand to the Prince. She did not even look my way. I stood and waited in silence.

"Here I am!" the Prince began amicably and cheerfully. "Only been back a few hours. You've never been out of my thoughts all this time (he kissed her hand gently), and there's no end of things I've been turning over in my mind thinking about you! There's so much to tell you, so much you must know… Well, we'll be able to talk our hearts out, won't we? First though, my ne'er-do-well son who, as I see, hasn't arrived yet…"

"Excuse me, Prince," Natasha interrupted him, blushing and confused, "I've got to say a few words to Ivan Petrovich. Vanya, would you mind?… A couple of words…"

She seized my hand and led me behind a screen.

"Vanya," she said in a whisper, taking me into the darkest corner, "will you or won't you forgive me?"

"Why, Natasha, what are you talking about?"

"No, Vanya, no, you have forgiven me too much and too often, but there must be a limit to everyone's goodwill. You'll never stop loving me, that much I know, but you'll think I'm ungrateful, and yesterday and the day before I was ungrateful, selfish, cruel…"

She suddenly dissolved in a flood of tears and pressed her face against my shoulder.

"There now, Natasha," I hastened to comfort her. "I've been very ill all night, I can hardly stand even as I speak, that's why I didn't come to see you last night or today, and there you are thinking I'm angry with you… My dearest, do you really imagine I don't know what you're going through now?"

"Well, that's settled then… it means you've forgiven me, as always," she said, smiling through tears and squeezing my hand till it hurt. "The rest can wait. I've lots to tell you, Vanya. Let's go back…"

"Yes, let's, Natasha! It was rude to leave him like that…"

"You just wait and see what happens," she whispered to me hastily. "I know everything now, I've worked it all out. It's all *his* fault. A lot is going to be settled tonight. Let's go!"

I didn't quite know what she meant, but there was no time to ask. Natasha approached the Prince with a radiant face. He was still

standing with his hat in his hands. She good-humouredly offered her apologies, took his hat, brought up a chair for him herself, and all three of us sat round her little table.

"I was saying about my scapegrace," the Prince continued, "I only saw him for a minute and on the street at that, when he was just off to see Countess Zinaida Fyodorovna. He was in a tearing hurry, and imagine, wouldn't even stop to come into the house with me after four days of separation. Furthermore, I own, Natalya Nikolayevna, I'm probably to blame for the fact that he isn't with you now and that we've arrived ahead of him. I knew I wouldn't be able to make it to the Countess's today, so I took the liberty of sending him on an errand to her instead. But he should be here any minute."

"He probably promised you he'd come today, did he?" Natasha enquired with the most innocent air, looking at the Prince.

"Goodness, of course, how could he not come! Why do you ask?" he exclaimed in surprise, looking hard at her. "On second thoughts, I know. You're angry with him. Yes of course, it's hardly the done thing for him to arrive last of all. But, I repeat, I'm to blame. Don't be hard on him. He's irresponsible, flighty. I'm not defending him, but there are some extraordinary factors which demand that not only should he not neglect to call on the Countess or fail to observe certain other courtesies, but on the contrary should visit her as frequently as possible. Well, seeing that he is with you virtually the whole time now and is quite oblivious of everything else on earth, please don't blame me if I should occasionally usurp him for an hour or two, no more, for my own needs. I'm convinced he's not been back once to see Princess K. since that evening, and more's the pity I haven't managed to question him about it yet!…"

I glanced at Natasha. She was listening to the Prince with a faintly derisive smile. But he spoke so candidly, so naturally. It seemed there were no grounds for suspecting him of anything.

"And did you really not know he's not been to see me once all these days?" Natasha asked in a soft, calm voice as though speaking of the most habitual occurrence.

"What! Not been to see you once? Do you realize what you're saying?" he said, apparently in utter amazement.

"You were here on Tuesday, late in the evening; he came the next morning for half an hour, and since then I haven't seen him once."

"But that's incredible! (His amazement was getting more and more pronounced.) I was convinced he hardly left you. I'm sorry, this is so strange… it's simply beyond me."

"Nevertheless it's true, and what a shame, because I was hoping you would come and tell me where he might be."

"Oh, goodness me! I'm sure he'll be here directly! But what you told me comes as such a surprise that… I must admit, I could have suspected him of anything but this… surely!…"

"That you should be so amazed! Personally I thought that, so far from being amazed, you knew exactly everything that was going on."

"Knew! Me? But I assure you, Natalya Nikolayevna, I saw him only for a minute today, and I questioned no one about him. And it strikes me as odd that you appear to disbelieve me," he continued, looking both of us up and down.

"Good Heavens, no," Natasha interposed, "I'm perfectly convinced you're telling the truth."

And she laughed again, full in his face, which made him draw back.

"Explain yourself," he said in confusion.

"There's nothing to explain. I speak very plainly. Surely you know how flighty and forgetful he is. Well, now he's been given completely free rein, he's got carried away."

"But one oughtn't to get carried away to such an extent; there's something else behind all this, and as soon as he arrives I'll insist he gives a full explanation. But what surprises me most of all is that you appear to accuse me too of something, whereas I wasn't even here. Be that as it may, Natalya Nikolayevna, I can see you're very angry with him – and I can well understand that! You've every right to be, and… and… it goes without saying, I'm the first to blame, well, if only because I was the first to turn up. Am I not right?" he continued, turning to me with an irritated smile.

Natasha flared up.

"I beg your pardon, Natalya Nikolayevna," he continued with dignity, "granted I am to blame, but only in that I left the day after I made your acquaintance, so what with you being so sensitive – a trait I

can't help noticing in your character – you've already managed to change your opinion of me, the more so since circumstances have rather given you grounds for this. Had I not gone away though, you'd have got to know me better, and under my supervision Alyosha would not have been so scatterbrained. Tonight you will hear what I have to say to him."

"You mean you will ensure that he starts getting tired of me. I just cannot see how, being as clever as you are, you can imagine that such a course of action would be of any help to me."

"Are you insinuating that I'm deliberately attempting to put him off you? You are doing me an injustice, Natalya Nikolayevna."

"I'm not in the habit of insinuating anything, whoever I'm talking to," Natasha replied. "On the contrary, I always try to be as plain as possible, as you may yet discover before the night is out. As for doing you an injustice, that was never my intention, nor could it have been, if only because you're not likely to be offended by whatever I say. I'm perfectly convinced of that, because I'm only too aware of how things stand between us, and I can't believe you're prepared to take our relationship seriously, are you? But if I really have offended you, I'm quite ready to ask your pardon, in order to satisfy the demands of… hospitality."

In spite of the light-hearted and even jocular tone with which Natasha said all this, smiling as she did, I had never before seen her so agitated. Only now did I become aware of what she must have been going through these past three days. Her mysterious declaration that she knew everything and had worked it all out frightened me; it implicated the Prince directly. She had changed her mind about him, and regarded him as her enemy; that much was plain. She apparently attributed to his influence all her troubles with Alyosha, and perhaps she had some grounds for this. I was afraid there would be a sudden scene between them. Her jocular tone was too transparent, too overt. Her concluding remark that he could not take their relationship seriously, that she was seeking pardon in accordance with the demands of hospitality, and her promise, couched as a threat to prove to him there and then that she was capable of speaking plainly – all that was so trenchant and unambiguous that it was impossible to suppose the Prince would not

have understood the full import of it all. I noticed the change of expression in his face, but he knew how to control himself. He immediately pretended that he hadn't noticed these words, hadn't understood their full significance and, as was to be expected, took refuge in banter.

"God forbid I should demand an apology!" he responded with a laugh. "That's not at all what I'm about – anyway it's against my principles to expect apologies from a lady. You will recall that at our first meeting I tried to warn you about my character, and so I trust you will not take offence at an observation, the more so since it refers to women in general. You too will probably agree with it," he continued, turning politely towards me. "Namely, I have noticed a trait in the female character: if for example a woman is guilty of something, she would much rather make amends later with a thousand different expressions of tenderness than fully admit to her guilt and ask for forgiveness when caught red-handed. And so, on the assumption that you've done me an injustice, I shall deliberately not ask for your apology now, at this precise moment. It would afford me greater satisfaction later, after you've recognized your guilt, to observe you making amends… with a thousand different expressions of tenderness. And you're so good, so pure, so unspoilt, so open that I anticipate the act of your apology would be a true delight. But rather than talk of apologies, why don't you tell me now if there is any way in which I could prove to you tonight that I'm treating you much more candidly and fairly than you imagine?"

Natasha blushed. It struck me too that there was a note of frivolity, even insouciance, a kind of indiscreet pleasantry in the Prince's reply.

"You'd like to prove to me that you're candid and open with me?" Natasha asked, looking at the Prince provocatively.

"Yes."

"In that case, will you do as I ask you?"

"You have my word unconditionally."

"It is this: Alyosha is not to be troubled on my account in any way whatsoever, either tonight or tomorrow. Not a single reproach that he had neglected me, not a single word of reproof. When I see him, I particularly want it to look as though nothing had happened between

us. He mustn't suspect a thing. That's how I want it. Will you give me your word?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," the Prince replied, "and allow me to add in all sincerity that I have seldom encountered a wiser and more level-headed attitude in such matters… But here we are, I believe this is Alyosha."

True enough, there was some stir in the passage. Natasha started and seemed to brace herself for something. The Prince sat with a serious expression on his face to see what would follow; he was watching Natasha closely. The door opened, and Alyosha burst in.

2

BURST IN WOULD BE THE ONLY WAY to describe it. His face was radiant, cheerful and exhilarated. It was evident that he had had a happy and joyous time of it these past four days. It was as good as written on his face that he wished to communicate something to us.

"Here I am!" he announced for all to hear. "The one who ought to have been here before everybody else! But now you'll find out everything, everything, everything! We hardly had time to exchange two words when we met the other time, Papa, but I had so much to tell you. It's only when he's in a good mood that he allows me to be so informal," he broke off, turning to me, "honest to God, at other times he just won't have it. His tactic is to be formal with me. But from this day on I want everything to be good between us, and I'll make sure it is! Incidentally, I've become a different man these past four days, completely and utterly different, and you'll hear all about it. However, of that later. But the main thing now, look – there she is! There! Again! Natasha, my darling, hello, you angel !" he said, taking a seat next to her and rapturously kissing her hand. "I missed you so much these past days! But that's the way it goes – it couldn't be helped! I just couldn't fit it all in. My sweet one! Am I mistaken that you look thinner? There, how pale you are…"

He was ecstatically covering her hands in kisses, looking at her rapturously with his magnificent eyes, as though he could never have his fill. I glanced at Natasha and by her face guessed we were both thinking the same thing – he was quite innocent. Indeed when and how could this *innocent* one have become blameworthy? A bright colour

suddenly suffused Natasha's pale cheeks as though all the blood in her heart now rushed to her head. Her eyes sparkled, and she glanced defiantly at the Prince.

"But where… have you been… all these days!" she said in a controlled, but faltering voice. Her breathing was heavy and uneven. My God, how she loved him!

"There's no getting away from it, it does look as though I am guilty before you. I beg your pardon, there can be no *as though* about it! I am guilty, and I know it. Indeed I have come in the full knowledge of it. Katya's been telling me since yesterday that no woman could put up with such slackness. (She's au fait with everything, all that happened here on Tuesday. I told her the day after.) I argued with her, I kept explaining to her, tried to make her see that the woman in question is called *Natasha* and that there is perhaps only one other in the whole world who's her equal, namely Katya – and I came here of course in the full knowledge that I had won the argument. Could an angel like you possibly fail to forgive! 'He wasn't here, then it stands to reason something must have detained him, rather than that he's fallen out of love,' that's how my Natasha would reason! As if anyone could stop loving you? It's inconceivable! I missed you more than anything in the world. But all the same I'm guilty! Mind you, after I've told you everything you'll be the first to exonerate me! You'll all hear the full story directly, I've got to pour my heart out to you – that's why I'm here. I thought of popping in during the day (I happened to have half a moment to spare), to kiss you in mid-flight as it were, but that wasn't to be – Katya immediately lined up something vitally important for me. That was before you saw me sitting in the carriage, Papa. This, though, was on a different occasion when I was due to call on Katya in answer to another note of hers. It's got to the stage when messengers never stop delivering notes between our houses. Ivan Petrovich, I only managed to read your note late in the night last night, and of course you're perfectly right in everything you wrote. But what was to be done – it was a physical impossibility! So I thought, 'Come tomorrow night I'll make a clean breast of it,' because let's face it, I couldn't possibly have not come to see you tonight, could I, Natasha?"

"What note was that?" Natasha asked.

"He dropped in on me and found me out, as they say, so of course he left me a letter giving me a piece of his mind for not coming to see you. And he was perfectly right. That was yesterday."

Natasha looked at me.

"But if you had the time to go calling on Katerina Fyodorovna from morning till night—" the Prince ventured to interject.

"I know, I know what you're going to say," Alyosha interrupted him, "'If you could go to see Katya, you had twice as many reasons for being here.' I couldn't agree with you more and shall go even further: not twice, a million more reasons! But first, don't you know there are some strange, unexpected twists in life that upset the lot and turn everything topsy-turvy? Well, that's exactly what happened to me. I did say I had changed totally these past few days, and I meant it – totally, to my very finger tips. It stands to reason therefore that something must have led up to it!"

"Oh my God, what on earth happened to you! The suspense is killing us, please!" Natasha exclaimed, smiling at Alyosha's agitation.

There was no denying it, he did look a little ridiculous; he was excited; words were simply gushing out of him in a torrent, often in disarray, pell-mell. He had an urge to keep talking with no let-up. But as he spoke, he wouldn't let go of Natasha's hand and kept lifting it to his lips as though unable to have his fill of kissing it.

"You may well ask, what happened to me," Alyosha continued. "Oh, you dear people! What did I see, what did I do, whom did I meet? First, Katya – she's perfection itself! I really and truly didn't know her until now! And even on Tuesday, when I spoke to you about her – Natasha, do you remember? – I was so taken by her. Well, even then I scarcely knew her. She herself has been shying away from me till the present. But now we really have got to know each other. We're the best of friends. But I'll begin at the beginning. First, Natasha, if only you could have heard what she had to tell me about you after she heard from me the following day, Wednesday, what happened between us here… Incidentally, it comes back to me, what a silly ass you must have thought me, when I called on you Wednesday morning! You welcome me with such enthusiasm. You are so taken by the new arrangement between us, you want to speak to me about all this. You are moody and

at the same time impish and playful with me, whereas I, I am so stuck-up! Oh, what a fool! What a fool! Honest to God, I wanted to show off, cut a dash in front of you as a husband-to-be, a respectable gentleman, and yet, the very thought of bragging in front of you, you – of all people! Oh, how you must have laughed at me at the time and how pathetic I must have appeared in your eyes!"

The Prince did not say a word and regarded Alyosha with a kind of a mock-serious, triumphant smile. It was as though he were pleased that his son appeared to be making a fool of himself. I watched him closely the whole evening and became absolutely convinced that he did not love his son at all, even though people spoke of his all too ardent paternal love.

"After I left you, I went to see Katya," Alyosha rattled on. "I already said it was only this morning that we got to know each other totally, and it's simply marvellous how it all came about… I can scarcely account for it now… A couple of warm words, a couple of emotional exchanges, of thoughts expressed unreservedly, and we – were joined for ever. You must, you simply must get to know her, Natasha! The way she described you, the way she reasoned about you to me! The way she explained to me what a treasure you were for me! Little by little she explained to me all her ideas and outlook on life. She's such a serious, such a spirited girl! She spoke of our duty, of our mission in life, that we must serve mankind and, seeing that we had reached total agreement in a mere five or six hours of talking, we ended by vowing eternal friendship and that all our life long we'd act as one!"

"Act in what?" the Prince enquired in surprise.

"I've changed so much, Father, that all this must of course come as a surprise to you. In fact I can anticipate all your objections in advance," Alyosha replied with solemnity. "You are all intensely practical people, you have so many tried-and-tested rules, strict and inflexible. Everything that's new, young, fresh you regard with suspicion, resentment, scorn. But now I'm no longer the one you knew a few days ago. I am different! I can face unflinchingly everything and everyone in the world. If I know that my conviction is justified, I shall follow it through to its uttermost limit, and if I manage to keep to the straight

and narrow, it means I'm an honest person. That just about covers it. You can say what you like now, I have the strength of my convictions."

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" the Prince exclaimed sardonically.

Natasha looked at us in alarm. She was concerned for Alyosha. He often tended to get carried away to his own disadvantage in conversation, and she knew this. She didn't want him to appear ridiculous before us, especially before his father.

"Come, come Alyosha! This smells of some kind of philosophy," she said. "You must have picked it up from someone… why don't you just carry on with your own story?"

"But I am going to!" Alyosha exclaimed. "You see, Katya's got these two distant relatives, cousins of some sort, Levenka and Borenka; one's a student, and the other's just a young man. She keeps in with them, and what a pair they are! They hardly ever visit the Countess, on principle. When Katya and I were talking about man's destiny, his vocation and all that, she mentioned them to me and immediately wrote me a note for them. I dashed off at once to introduce myself to them. That same night we got on like a house on fire. There were about a dozen people of all types present: students, officers, artists – there was a writer… they all know you, Ivan Petrovich, that is to say they've read your books and expect a great deal from you in the future. That's what they themselves said to me. I told them I knew you, and promised to introduce you to them. They all greeted me with open arms and gave me a warm reception. I made a point of telling them straight away that I'm soon to be a married man, and that's just how they came to regard me – as a married man. In the main they live on the top floors of houses, right under the eaves. They all meet as often as they can, but usually on Wednesdays at Levenka's and Borenka's. They're a young idealistic bunch, all ardent philanthropists. We talked about our present, our future, about science, literature – it was all so to the point, so down-to-earth, so matter of fact… There's a high-school student who comes too. How well they get on with one another, how cultured they are! I've never seen anything the like before! Where have I been up till now? What have I seen? What have I been brought up on? You're the only one, Natasha, who has ever spoken of anything of the sort to me. Oh, Natasha, you definitely must get to know them. Katya already has.

They almost worship her, and Katya has already told Levenka and Borenka that when she comes of age and takes charge of her inheritance, she'll immediately donate a million roubles to charity."

"And the trustees of this million will no doubt be Levenka and Borenka and their merry men?" the Prince asked.

"That's not true, not true! Shame on you, Father, for saying such a thing!" Alyosha exclaimed with fervour. "I suspect I know what you're thinking! As for this million, we really did discuss at length how best to spend it. In the end we decided it should first and foremost go on public education…"

"Yes, I must confess, I didn't really know my Katerina Fyodorovna that well up till now," the Prince observed, as though to himself, still smiling ironically. "As a matter of fact I expected a great deal from her, but this—"

"But this what!" Alyosha interrupted. "Why are you so surprised? That this is a little unconventional for you? That no one's so far given a million, whereas she will? Is that it? But what if she doesn't want to live at other people's expense? Because to live off these millions would mean to live at other people's expense (this only came home to me recently). She wants to be of service to her country and her people and contribute her mite to the general good of the community. We read of this mite in our copybooks, did we not? But now that this mite smacks of a million – oh no, that won't do! And what does all this much vaunted ethic that I believed in so amount to? Why are you looking at me like that, Father? As though you see before you a clown, a fool! All right, a fool, what of it? Natasha, if only you'd heard what Katya had to say about this. 'It's not intelligence that counts, but the things that guide it: character, heart, noble aspirations, progress.' But the main thing is, we've Bezmygin's immortal words on this. Bezmygin's a friend of Levenka's and Borenka's and, you might as well know, he's got his head screwed on, a man of genius, really! Only yesterday he came out with, 'A fool who's admitted he's a fool is a fool no more!' What do you say to that! He's full of pronouncements like that. They come thick and fast from him."

"Every inch a genius!" the Prince observed.

"All you can do is mock! But I've never heard anything of the sort from you, nor from anyone of your circle. On the contrary, you all seem to keep things under your hat, try to sweep them under the carpet; everyone's to be cut down to size, brought down to one level, all noses to be regulation shape and length – as though that were possible! As though that weren't a thousand times less natural than what we talk about and ponder over. And they still call us Utopians! You should have heard what they had to say to me yesterday…"

"So what do you talk about and ponder over?" Natasha asked. "Tell us, Alyosha. I for one still can't quite make it out."

"In essence about everything that leads to progress, to humanity, to love – all this is discussed with reference to contemporary issues. We talk about freedom of speech, about the forthcoming reforms, about love for humanity, about present-day public figures – we analyse them, we read them. But the main thing is, we've promised to be perfectly frank between ourselves and to say everything about ourselves to one another without any embarrassment. Only frankness, only forthrightness can lead us to our goal. Bezmygin of all people has been particularly insistent on this. I told Katya about it, and she's completely at one with Bezmygin. And that's why we all, led by Bezmygin, have promised to act justly and forthrightly all our life long and – whatever others may say of us, however they may judge us – not to be flustered by anything, not to be ashamed of our enthusiasm, our fancies, our errors, but to press ahead regardless. If you want people to respect you, first and foremost respect your own self! Only in that way, only through self-respect will you oblige others to respect you. This is what Bezmygin says, and Katya agrees with him fully. As a matter of fact we're trying to reach some common ground in our convictions and have embarked upon individual self-appraisal, while at the same time meeting in group sessions to discuss and analyse one another with one another… to one… another…"

"Fiddlesticks!" the Prince exclaimed, disturbed. "And who's this Bezmygin anyway? No, I can't let this rest…"

"What can't you let rest?" Alyosha intervened. "Listen, Father, why am I saying all this in front of you? Because I'm hoping against hope to introduce you too to our circle. I've already given my word for you.

You're laughing, well, I knew you would! But hear me out! You're kind and you're a gentleman, and you will understand. After all, you've never seen these people, you've never heard them in person. All right, let's assume you've heard all this, you've investigated everything, you're awfully clever – but you haven't seen them in person, you've never mixed with them, and therefore how can you possibly judge fairly! You only imagine you can. No, you rub shoulders with them for a while, listen to what they have to say, and then, then – I vouch for it – you'll be one of us! But the main thing is, I'd like to devote all my energy to saving you from rack and ruin within your own circle to which you've become so attached, and from your own convictions."

The Prince listened to this outburst with the most sarcastic smile on his face; anger was written all over it. Natasha regarded him with the most unfeigned revulsion. He saw it, but pretended not to be aware of it. But no sooner had Alyosha finished, than the Prince suddenly burst out laughing. He even fell back in his chair as though unable to contain himself. But the laughter was completely forced. It was all too evident that he laughed merely in order to insult and demean his son as much as possible. Alyosha really did take offence; he looked unutterably dejected. But he waited patiently till his father's mirth had subsided.

"Father," he began despondently, "why are you mocking me? I came to you with an open mind and in all sincerity. If in your opinion I'm not talking sense why, instead of laughing at me, don't you teach me to know better? And what is there to laugh at? The things I now hold holy and inviolate? Very well, so I am in error and everything I look up to is mistaken and false, and I'm just a silly fool, as you've pointed out to me many a time. But even if I am in error, it's not for lack of sincerity and openness. I've not lost my dignity. I'm sustained by exalted ideas. Let them be erroneous, but they are rooted in hallowed ground. I've already told you that you and your ilk have not revealed to me anything yet that would have guided me and induced me to follow you. Refute them, tell me something that would put them into the shade, and I'll follow you, but do not laugh at me, because that makes me very bitter."

Alyosha pronounced this with extreme dignity and steadfast composure. Natasha observed him compassionately. The Prince heard his son out with some surprise and changed his tone immediately.

"I had no intention whatever of offending you, my boy," he replied, "on the contrary, I sympathize with you. You are about to take a step in your life that will oblige you to stop being such a frivolous child. That's all that was on my mind. I laughed quite involuntarily and had no intention of offending you."

"Why then did I get that impression?" Alyosha continued with a note of bitterness. "Why is it I've felt for a long time that you regard me with a jaundiced eye and cold disdain, quite unlike the way a father should view his son? Why is it I feel that, had I been you, I wouldn't have dared to ridicule my son quite so offensively as you're ridiculing me now? Listen, why don't we explain ourselves openly, now, once and for all, to prevent all further misunderstandings? And… to be perfectly honest, when I came in, it struck me that here too there'd been some kind of a misunderstanding – it wasn't quite how I expected to find you all here together. Yes or no? If yes, wouldn't it be better if each one of us came out into the open? Honesty's the best policy!"

"Go on, keep talking, Alyosha!" the Prince said. "What you're suggesting, is very wise. Perhaps that's what we ought to have done in the first place," he added, glancing at Natasha.

"Please don't take my candour in bad part," Alyosha began, "you wanted it, you sought it. Listen to me. You agreed to my marriage with Natasha. You gave us this happiness and in doing so you went against your own nature. You were magnanimous, and we all appreciate your noble gesture. So why do you now appear to take some kind of delight in constantly suggesting to me that I'm still only a ridiculous child and quite unfit to be a husband. And as if that wasn't enough, you appear to want to ridicule, demean, even to denigrate me in Natasha's eyes. You're always only too happy to present me in a ridiculous light. I've noticed this not just now but a long time ago. It's as though you were for some reason deliberately trying to prove to us that our marriage is laughable and grotesque, and that we're not suited to each other. Indeed, it seems as though you yourself have no faith in what you're advocating for us, as though you regarded everything as a joke, an amusing episode, some kind of a light-hearted pantomime… You must remember it's not just from what you said today that I deduce this. It was that same Tuesday night after I went straight back to you from here

that I heard you make a few strange remarks which not only astonished but even upset me. And on Wednesday too when you were leaving, you made a couple of observations on our present situation which weren't exactly offensive, on the contrary, but somehow not quite what I'd have expected from you – you were somehow too off hand, lacking in affection, in respect for her… It's difficult to put into words, but the tone was clear, my heart sank. Tell me that I'm wrong. Disabuse me, cheer me up and… and her too, because you upset her too. I knew it from the first glance, the moment I came into the room…"

Alyosha spoke firmly and with ardour. Natasha listened to him in a kind of exultation and, deeply agitated and her cheeks blazing, spoke a couple of times to herself in the course of his speech, "Yes, yes, that's right!" The Prince was nonplussed.

"My dear boy," he replied, "I can't of course recall everything I said to you, but it is very strange you should have interpreted my words in this manner. I'm ready to disabuse you in any way I can. If I laughed just now, that too can be explained. Let me tell you this, my laughter was in fact meant to mask my bitter emotions. When I reflect that you soon intend to become a husband, it strikes me now as being totally unrealizable, inept and, pardon me, even ridiculous. You object to my laughing, but I say it's all because of you. Mea culpa too, perhaps I haven't been keeping a close enough eye on you lately, with the result that it wasn't until tonight that I discovered what you're capable of. Now I shudder to think what your future with Natalya Nikolayevna will be like. I was overhasty. I can see you two are quite incompatible. All love passes, but incompatibility stays for good. Never mind what happens to you, but if your intentions are honourable, have you not considered that you'll be the ruin of Natalya Nikolayevna too – completely and utterly? There you were holding forth for a whole hour on love for humanity, on lofty sentiments, on the nobility of people whom you had met, but ask Ivan Petrovich what I said to him a little while ago as we were making our way up this abominable staircase to the third floor and stopped at the door, thanking God for the safety of our life and limb. Have you any idea what flashed through my mind then? I was astonished that you could, with all your love for Natalya Nikolayevna, put up with her living in such a place? How is it it hadn't

occurred to you that if you haven't the means, that if you're not equipped to carry out your obligations, you've no right to be a husband, no right to take upon yourself any commitments? Love alone is not enough, love is attested by deeds. Whereas your argument runs, 'I may be hard to live with, but you'll have to grin and bear it!' Surely that's cruel and unfair! To talk of all-pervading love, to be enthused by lofty humanitarian principles and at the same time to commit crimes against love and not be aware it – is beyond me! Don't interrupt me, Natalya Nikolayevna, let me finish. I feel altogether too bitter and I must have my say. You said, Alyosha, that these past days you marvelled at everything that's noble, exalted, equitable, and reproached me that in my circle there are no such sentiments, only arid rationality. Just consider – to dedicate yourself to the lofty and the sublime, and then, after what happened here on Tuesday, to go and neglect for four days the one who ought to have been dearer to you than anyone else in the world! You even confessed to telling Katerina Fyodorovna that Natalya Nikolayevna loves you so much, that she is so magnanimous she'll pardon your misdemeanour. But what right have you to expect such a pardon and wager on it? And has it really never occurred to you how many bitter thoughts, how much doubt and suspicion you sowed in Natalya Nikolayevna's mind during these days? Did you really suppose that just because you became infatuated there with some novel ideas you had the right to neglect your foremost obligation? Forgive me, Natalya Nikolayevna, that I've gone back on my word. But the present matter is far more important than any word of mine – I'm sure you'll appreciate that… Do you realize, Alyosha, that I found Natalya Nikolayevna in the throes of such suffering that one can hardly guess what hell you made her life these past four days, which by rights should have been the happiest in her life. Such are your deeds on the one hand, and words, words, words on the other… don't you think I'm right? And after all this, how can you blame me when it's your own fault through and through?"

The Prince stopped. He had got carried away by his eloquence and could not conceal his triumph from us. When Alyosha heard about Natasha's suffering, he glanced at her in anguish. But Natasha was already fully resolved.

"That'll do, don't worry, Alyosha," she said, "others are more to blame than you are. Sit down and listen to what I now have to say to your father. It's time to put an end to this!"

"Explain yourself, Natalya Nikolayevna," the Prince responded, "I beg you in all earnestness! I've been listening to allegations to this effect for two hours now. This is becoming unbearable, and I must admit it's not the kind of reception I was expecting."

"Perhaps, because you were hoping to charm us with words so that we wouldn't even notice your ulterior motives. What is there to explain to you? You yourself know everything and understand everything. Alyosha's right. Your first and foremost wish is – to separate us. You knew in advance almost exactly what would happen here after that Tuesday night and had it all worked out. I already said you do not regard me or our betrothal, which you initiated, at all seriously. This is all a joke for you. You're playing a game and working to a plan. Your gamble will pay off. Alyosha was right to reproach you for regarding all this as a pantomime. Rather than reprimand him, you ought to be delighted, because without realizing it, he has done everything you wanted him to do, perhaps even more."

I was flabbergasted. I had rather expected some kind of a catastrophe to happen that evening. But Natasha's all too blunt honesty, and the undisguised contemptuous ring of her words, left me speechless. It would appear she really was privy to something, I thought, and had irrevocably decided on a clean break. Perhaps she'd even been looking forward to seeing the Prince just in order to tell him everything to his face. The Prince went a little pale. Alyosha's face depicted naive fear and pained expectation.

"Do you realize what you've just accused me of just now?" the Prince exclaimed. "And have the goodness to consider a little what you're saying… I don't understand a thing."

"Ah! So you want me to spell it out to you?" Natasha said. "Even he, even Alyosha interpreted what you said, exactly like I did, and we didn't confer, we hadn't even seen each other! And it seemed to him too that you're playing a game of cat and mouse with us, but he loves you and believes in you as though you were a god. You didn't think it necessary to be more cautious or cunning with him. You banked on his not

understanding. But he has a sensitive, tender, impressionable heart, and your words, your *tone*, as he put it, have left a lasting impression in his heart…"

"I understand nothing, nothing at all!" the Prince repeated, turning to me with a look of profound astonishment, as though appealing to me as a witness. He was irritated and flustered. "You're paranoid, you're in a panic," he continued, addressing her, "to put it bluntly, you're simply jealous of Katerina Fyodorovna and are therefore ready to accuse the whole world and above all me, and… allow me in that case to be perfectly blunt with you – one gets a strange impression of your character… I'm not used to such scenes. I wouldn't consider staying here a minute longer had it not been for my son's interests… I'm still waiting in case you deign to explain yourself."

"So in your stubbornness you will insist that I dot the i's despite the fact that everything's as plain as a pikestaff to you? You definitely want me to spell things out to you, do you?"

"That's precisely what I want."

"All right then, listen!" exclaimed Natasha, her eyes flashing with rage. "I'll tell you everything, absolutely everything!"

3

TOO EXCITED TO NOTICE IT, she rose to her feet and began to speak. The Prince listened for a good while, then he too got up. The whole scene was beginning to get rather melodramatic.

"Cast your mind back to Tuesday?" Natasha began. You said you needed money, a life of ease, social standing – do you recall?"

"Yes."

"Well, in order to get this money, in order to secure all the advantages which were already beginning to slip through your fingers, you came here on Tuesday and contrived this betrothal, hoping that this ruse would help you to cling on to what was still left."

"Natasha," I exclaimed, "think what you're saying!"

"Ruse! Contrived!" The Prince repeated with a show of wounded dignity.

Alyosha sat overwhelmed with grief and looked on, hardly understanding a thing.

"No, no, don't stop me, I vowed I'd say everything," Natasha continued in her excitement. "You remember, Alyosha wouldn't listen to you. For six months you worked on him to try to get his mind off me. He wouldn't be swayed by you. And suddenly the time came when you just couldn't afford to wait any longer. If you failed to grasp the opportunity, the bride and the money – above all, the money, a dowry of a round three million roubles – would slip through your fingers. There was only one solution – Alyosha just had to fall in love with the girl you had chosen for him. You thought, if he fell in love with her, he might let go of me…"

"Natasha, Natasha!" Alyosha exclaimed in distress. "What are you saying!"

"That's exactly what you did," she continued, ignoring Alyosha's exclamation, "but – here again the same old story! Everything would have been fine, except that I was in the way again! There was only one hope. Being as worldly-wise and shrewd as you are, it might not have escaped you some while back that Alyosha appeared to be tiring of his former attachment. You couldn't have failed to notice that he was beginning to neglect me, to get bored, to fail to come to see me for days on end. Wouldn't it be nice, you thought, if he got completely fed up and dropped me altogether, but his decisive stand on Tuesday caught you completely unawares. What were you to do?"

"Just a moment," the Prince exclaimed, "quite the contrary, in fact—"

"I said," Natasha interrupted him firmly, "you asked yourself that evening, 'What's to be done?' and decided to pretend to go along with the idea of us getting married, just to keep him quiet. The wedding itself, you thought, could be put off indefinitely. In the meantime the new love was already beckoning. You noticed it. It was on this burgeoning love that you staked everything."

"Romances, romances," the Prince said in a subdued voice as though to himself, "solitude, daydreaming and a diet of romantic fiction!"

"Yes, it's on this new love that you staked everything," Natasha repeated, completely ignoring the Prince's words in a peak of feverish excitement and getting carried away more and more, "and how promising this new love was! Let's face it, it all started when he still knew little of the girl's virtues! On the night and at the precise moment when he was confiding to her that he could no longer love her because duty and love for someone else prevented him – the girl suddenly betrayed so much integrity, so much sympathy both for him and her rival, so much heartfelt charity, that even with his faith in her excellence, it hadn't even occurred to him until that moment that she could be so wonderful! When he came to see me, all he could do was talk about her – that's how great an impression she'd made on him Yes, come the next day he was already dying to see this exquisite creature again, if only out of a sense of gratitude. And why indeed not pay her a

visit? She, the first one, was no longer suffering, her fate had been decided, she could look forward to a lifetime of togetherness, while the other girl was only going to snatch a brief moment… And wouldn't it have been awful of Natasha if she'd begrudged even that moment? And so little by little, instead of a moment, Natasha found herself deprived of a day, then another, and another. Meanwhile the girl revealed herself to him in a totally unexpected, new light. She was so gracious, such an enthusiast and at the same time so naively childish, and in this so very much like himself. They vowed eternal friendship, kindred love, they wanted to stay together for life. "*In a mere five or six hours of talking*" his whole being opened up to new sentiments, and he surrendered himself to her heart and soul… Time would finally come, you calculated, when he'd compare his former love with his new, fresh passions. The familiar, the routine; the all too serious and exacting; the jealousy-ridden, intolerant, tear-sodden world of yesteryear… There, even if he was allowed some fun and games, it was not as an equal, but as a child… but the worst of it was that everything that had gone on before was so commonplace, so utterly predictable…"

Tears and bitter convulsions choked her, but Natasha made one more effort.

"So what next? It was all a question of time. Marriage to Natasha wasn't altogether imminent – there was still plenty of time, and room for change… And what with your word-spinning, your hints, your insinuations, your eloquence… Might even think of something against this tiresome Natasha, set her in a bad light! And… how it would all unravel is anybody's guess, but victory would be yours! Alyosha! Don't be angry with me, my darling! Don't say I don't understand your love and don't know how to value it. Of course I know that even now you love me and that right at this moment you may not even understand what has been weighing upon me. I know it was very bad of me to have come out with all this now. But what could I do if I could see it all coming and couldn't stop loving you more and more… endlessly… madly!"

She buried her face in her hands, slumped into a chair and burst into tears like a child. Alyosha rushed to her with a scream. Her tears inevitably brought out tears in him too.

Her bout of weeping helped the Prince a great deal it would seem. All Natasha's obsessions during this lengthy tirade, all the sting of her attack upon him – at which he would have been expected to take offence, if only for form's sake – all that could now apparently be put down to a crazed eruption of jealousy, to thwarted love, even to sickness. It behoved him even to demonstrate some sympathy…

"Calm yourself, don't distress yourself, Natalya Nikolayevna," the Prince comforted her, "this is all nervousness, fantasy, daydreams, the consequence of solitude… You were so upset by his inconsiderate behaviour… But this was just lack of consideration on his part. The most important factor that you mentioned, the incident on Tuesday, ought rather to have demonstrated his infinite attachment to you, whereas you imagined—"

"Please don't go on, spare me the agony now at least!" Natasha interrupted him, crying bitterly. "My heart had revealed everything to me, and way back at that! Do you really think I don't understand that all his previous love for me is over… Here in this room, all alone… when he left me, forgot me… I went through it all… I turned it all over in my mind… What else was I to do! I'm not blaming you, Alyosha… Why, Prince, are you deceiving me? Do you really suppose I didn't try to deceive myself!… Oh, many a time, many a time! Didn't I listen out for every tone in his voice? Haven't I learnt to read his face, his eyes?… Everything, everything is over, everything is dead and buried… Oh, how wretched I am!"

Alyosha was weeping in front of her on his knees.

"Yes, yes, I'm to blame! It's all because of me!…" he repeated amidst his sobs.

"No, don't blame yourself, Alyosha… it's the others… our enemies. They're the ones!"

"Now look here," the Prince began with a show of impatience, "on what grounds do you attribute all these… crimes… to me? You're only surmising, you've no proof—"

"Proof!" Natasha exclaimed, getting up from her chair quickly, "you need proof, do you, you treacherous man! You had no other plan in mind when you came here with your proposition! You needed to put your son's mind at rest, dull his pangs of conscience so that he should

all the more freely and easily surrender himself entirely to Katya. Without this he'd have carried on thinking of me, stood his ground against you, and you have got tired of waiting. Well, isn't that so?"

"I must admit," the Prince replied with a sarcastic smile, "had I wanted to deceive you, that's just how I'd have gone about it. You're very… clever, but this has to be proved before you begin to cast such slurs on people—"

"Proved! What about your behaviour when you tried to persuade him to give me up? Whoever teaches his son to disregard or to play fast and loose with such obligations because of social advantages and money corrupts him! What was it you just said about the staircase and the place I live in? Was it not you who cut his allowance which you gave him formerly, so as to make us part through want and hunger? These rooms and this staircase are all your doing, and now you have the gall to blame him for it, you two-faced man, you! And how ever did you manage to bring yourself to such ardour that night, where did you manage to dredge up such novel, uncharacteristic ideas? Anyway, why were you so interested in me? I've been pacing up and down here these last four days. I kept turning everything over in my mind, weighing things up, your every word, the expression on your face, and concluded it was all a sham, a joke, a comedy – despicable, low and unworthy… I know you pretty well, I've known you for a long time! Every time Alyosha returned after seeing you, I could guess by his face what it was you had been saying and drumming into him. I've followed your every move to influence him! No, you can't deceive me! Perhaps you've some other schemes up your sleeve, perhaps I haven't even identified the main one now, but let that pass! You've been deceiving me – that's the most important thing of all! That's precisely what needed to be said straight to your face!…"

"Is that it? Is that all the proof you have? But just think, hysterical woman that you are – this pantomime (as you called my Tuesday's proposal) was too much of a commitment. It would have been altogether too frivolous of me."

"How, how would you have committed yourself? As though you'd think twice about deceiving me? In any case, who cares if some girl has been deceived! She's just a wretched waif, disowned by her father,

defenceless, *only herself to blame for her disgrace, and no morals to speak of.* She's hardly worth the bother, provided this ruse could be of the smallest, of the least advantage to anyone!"

"Just think, what a position you're putting yourself in, Natalia Nikolayevna! You definitely insist that I've insulted you. But surely such an insult would be so preposterous, so degrading, that I'm at a loss that you could so much as suggest it, let alone insist on it. One must surely be too inured to everything to admit such a possibility so easily, if you will pardon me. I'm justified in rebuking you because you're setting my son up against me. If he hasn't yet rebelled against me openly because of you, he surely is against me in his heart—"

"No, Father, no," Alyosha exclaimed, "if I haven't rebelled against you, it's because I don't believe you could have insulted her, and anyway I believe such an insult is simply inconceivable."

"Did you hear that?" the Prince exclaimed.

"Natasha, I'm to blame for everything, don't accuse him. It's unfair and it's appalling!"

"Did you hear that, Vanya? He's already against me!" Natasha exclaimed.

"Enough!" the Prince said. "We must put a stop to this harrowing scene. This blind and vicious, totally unwarranted outburst of jealousy shows your character in quite a different light for me. I've been warned. We've been overhasty, indeed we have. You're not even aware what an insult this has been for me. To you it's nothing. We've been overhasty… overhasty… of course, my word is my bond, but… I am a father and I care for my son's happiness—"

"You're going back on your word," Natasha exclaimed, at the end of her tether, "you're only too glad of the opportunity! But, let me tell you this, two days ago, I myself, here, made up my mind to release him from his word, and I'm confirming it now in front of everyone. He is free!"

"That is, perhaps you want to rekindle in him all his former anxieties, his sense of duty, his 'hankering for obligations' (as you put it just now), so as to tie him to you again as before. Let's face it, this would be in line with your theory, that's why I'm mentioning it. But enough said – time will decide. I'll await a more relaxed occasion to reach an understanding with you. I hope we're not breaking off our relationship

completely. I also hope you'll come to hold me in higher regard. I was minded to tell you today of my plan concerning your parents, from which you'd have seen… but enough! Ivan Petrovich!" he added, approaching me, "I've always been anxious to get to know you better, and never more so than now. I hope to bring you round to my way of thinking. I shall call on you in a day or two. Do I have your permission?"

I bowed. It was clear to me I could no longer avoid making his acquaintance. He shook my hand, bowed to Natasha in silence and left with an air of affronted dignity.

4

FOR A FEW MINUTES NONE OF US SPOKE. Natasha sat lost in thought, sad and crushed. All her energy was suddenly drained from her. She stared straight ahead, seeing nothing, as though in a reverie, holding Alyosha's hand in hers. The latter was quietly bemoaning his misfortune, from time to time glancing at her with apprehensive curiosity.

At last he started to comfort her timorously, begging her not to be angry, and took the blame upon himself; it was apparent that he was very anxious to exonerate his father and that he had particularly set his heart on this; he tried to raise the matter several times, but was afraid to be too outspoken for fear of again incurring Natasha's wrath. He swore of his undying, unswerving love and ardently defended his attachment to Katya, repeating over and over again that he loved Katya only as a sister, a dear, kind sister, whom he could not possibly abandon, which would certainly be unspeakably rude and cruel of him, and kept insisting that if only Natasha were to get to know Katya, they would instantly become the best of friends for life and that that would be the end of all their misunderstandings. This was something he looked forward to with particular relish. And he was perfectly sincere about it, bless him. He could not grasp Natasha's misgivings, as a matter of fact neither did he quite take in what it was Natasha had said to his father. All he really knew was that they had quarrelled, and that it was that which was weighing heavily upon his heart.

"Are you cross with me because of your father?" Natasha asked.

“How can I be,” he replied bitterly, “when I’m the culprit and guilty of everything? It was I who brought you to that state, and in your anger you turned on him because you wanted to exonerate me. You’re always exonerating me, and I don’t deserve it. There had to be a scapegoat, so you turned on him. Whereas really and truly he’s not to blame at all!” Alyosha exclaimed, gaining heart. “Surely that’s what not what he came here for! That’s not what he expected to hear!”

But, seeing that Natasha appeared disconsolate and looked at him with reproach, he immediately backed down.

“There, there now, forgive me,” he said. “It’s all my fault really!”

“Yes, Alyosha,” she continued with a heavy heart. “Now he has come between us and upset the whole of our little world for good. You always believed in me more than in anyone else. Now he has sown suspicion in your heart against me, mistrust, you keep blaming me, he has taken from me one half of your heart. It’s a black day for us.”

“Don’t say that, Natasha. Why do you say ‘a black day’?” he was offended by the expression.

“His kindness and rectitude are all a sham to beguile you,” Natasha continued, “now he’ll go out of his way to drive a wedge between us.”

“I swear to you, he won’t!” Alyosha exclaimed with even greater fervour. “He was irritated when he said ‘overhasty’. You’ll see for yourself, tomorrow, in a few days’ time, he’ll come to his senses, but if he is so angry that he really opposes our marriage, I swear to you, I won’t knuckle under. I may yet have enough strength for that… And do you know who’s going to help us?” he suddenly exclaimed, elated by his idea. “Katya’s going to help us! And you’ll see, you really will see what a wonderful creature she is! You’ll see if she wants to be your rival and split us up! And wasn’t it really unfair of you to say that I’m the sort of person who can fall out of love the day after the wedding! It really hurt me when you said that! No, I’m not like that at all, and if I have been going to see Katya rather a lot…”

“What’s the use, Alyosha, see her whenever you want. That wasn’t what I was talking about. You misunderstood me. Stay with whoever makes you happy. I can’t expect more from you than your heart can grant…”

Mavra came in.

"Do you want your tea served, or not? Heavens above, the samovar's been on the boil for the last two hours. It's already eleven o'clock."

Her tone was grumpy and rude; it was clear she was very out of sorts and displeased with Natasha. The fact was that these past few days, ever since Tuesday, she'd been most excited that her young mistress – whom she loved to distraction – was going to get married and had spread the good news round the whole house, the neighbourhood, in the shop, and had told the caretaker. She had boasted with all solemnity that the Prince, an important man, a general no less, and fabulously rich, had called in person on her young mistress to ask her to agree, and she, Mavra, had heard it all with her own ears, and suddenly – now – all this was to end in a puff of smoke! The Prince had left in anger without even having had some tea, and the one to blame for this was of course the young lady herself. Mavra had overheard her speak to him disrespectfully.

"Well, all right… bring it in," Natasha replied.

"And something to eat as well?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Natasha was at a loss.

"There we were preparing like mad," Mavra continued. "I've been run off my feet since yesterday! I even had to dash to the Nevsky for wine, and all for nothing!…" and she left the room, slamming the door angrily.

Natasha blushed and looked at me rather strangely. In the meantime tea was served. The food included some game, some kind of fish and a couple of bottles of excellent wine from Yeliseyev's.* "What is all that in aid of?" I thought to myself.

"You see, Vanya, what I'm like," Natasha said, approaching the table, embarrassed even before me. "I knew very well everything would turn out the way it did, and still I hoped against hope that perhaps it would end differently. Alyosha would arrive, start making up to us, we'd all be friends again, all my suspicions would prove groundless, my fears dispelled, and… just in case, I prepared a bite to eat. Well, I thought we might sit up late into the night, talking…"

Poor Natasha! She blushed crimson as she said this. Alyosha got terribly excited.

"You see, Natasha!" he exclaimed. "You had no faith in yourself. Just two hours ago you didn't believe your own suspicions! No, all this needs to be put right. I'm to blame, I've brought all this about, and it's all up to me to put it right now. Natasha, let me go to my father immediately! I've got to see him. He feels offended and insulted. I must comfort him. I'll talk to him, just the two of us, I'll speak only for myself. You won't be involved. I'll settle everything… Don't be upset that I'm rushing after him like that, leaving you on your own. It's not that at all – I'm sorry for him. He's bound to make amends to you, you'll see… Tomorrow at first light I'll be back, and stay with you all day – I shan't go to Katya's…"

Natasha did not try to stop him, and even encouraged him to go. She couldn't stand the thought of Alyosha forcing himself to stay against his wishes, hanging around her place for days, getting bored with her. All she asked for was that he shouldn't say anything in her name, and she put a brave face on it with a smile at parting. He was just about to leave, but suddenly he went up to her, took both her hands in his and sat down next to her. He looked at her with the utmost tenderness.

"Natasha, my precious, my angel, don't be angry with me, and let's not quarrel ever. And promise to trust me in everything as I trust you. This is what I'm now going to tell you, my angel. We quarrelled once before, I can't remember what it was about. I was in the wrong. We wouldn't speak to each other. I didn't want to be the first to apologize, but I was dreadfully upset. I walked all over the town, hung around in various places, called on friends, but with a heavy, dreadfully heavy heart… And it crossed my mind then: what if you fell ill, say, and died. And when I imagined that, I was overcome with such despair as though I'd really lost you for ever. My thoughts got more and more morbid and frightening. And then little by little I began to imagine going to your graveside, falling on it senseless, spreading my arms over it and being lost in grief. I imagined myself kissing your grave, calling upon you to come out, if only for a minute, praying to God for a miracle, that you should rise for me from the dead, if only for a second. I imagined how I'd have hurled myself to embrace you, cuddle and kiss you and, I'm sure, have died on the spot with ecstasy that I was able, however briefly, to put my arms around you as before. And as I was imagining all this,

the thought struck me: here I am asking you back from God just for a brief second, whereas you'd been with me for a whole six months and the number of times we'd fallen out with each other in those six months, the number of days we'd not spoken to each other! We had quarrelled for days on end and taken our happiness for granted, and all of a sudden I'm calling you from your grave and for just one instant am prepared to pay with my whole life!… When this dawned on me, I could stand it no longer and rushed to you as fast as I could. I ran in and you were already waiting for me, and when we embraced each other after our quarrel, I remember I held you so tightly as though I really was about to lose you. Natasha! let's not quarrel, ever! I just can't bear it! And, my God! Is it possible to imagine I could ever leave you!"

Natasha was crying. They embraced each other tightly, and Alyosha swore once more that he'd never leave her. Then he dashed off to his father's. He was firmly convinced he'd settle everything once and for all.

"It's all over! Everything's finished!" Natasha said, clutching my hand convulsively. "He loves me and will never stop loving me. But he loves Katya too, and after some time he'll love her more than me. But this nasty viper of a Prince won't rest, and then…"

"Natasha! I can see for myself the Prince is not playing fair, but…"

"You didn't believe everything I said to him. I could tell by your face. But wait, you'll see for yourself whether or not I was right. I was just speaking in general terms – God knows what else he's got in mind! He's a terrible man! I've been pacing up and down the room these past four days and worked it all out for myself. The thing he was after most was to take the load off Alyosha's mind, to relieve him of his depression, which was stopping him from enjoying life, to free him from the obligations of his love for me. He also came up with our engagement to worm himself into our confidence and charm Alyosha with his kindness and generosity. That's the honest truth, Vanya! It's Alyosha's character all over. He'd have stopped worrying on my account, he'd have felt happy about me. He'd have thought, now that she's my wife she's mine for ever, and he'd involuntarily have paid more attention to Katya than to me. The Prince must have got to know his Katya well and decided that she's a perfect match for him, that she'd be more of an attraction

to him than I. Oh, Vanya! You're my only hope now – for some reason or other he wants to meet you, to get to know you. Don't turn your back on this and try, for God's sake, dearest, to see the Countess soon. Meet this Katya, take a good look at her and tell me what she is all about exactly. I want it to come from you. No one understands me as you do, and you'll understand what I need. Find out too how close they are, what is there between them, what they talk about. But it's Katya, Katya I want you to have a look at ever so closely… Prove to me this one more time, my dearest, my beloved Vanya, prove to me your friendship this one more time! You are my one and only hope now!…"

* * *

When I returned home it was already after midnight. Nelly opened the door for me with a sleepy face. She smiled and looked at me cheerfully. The poor thing was most annoyed with herself for having fallen asleep. She had badly wanted to wait up for me. She said someone came inquiring after me and left a note on the table. The note was from Masloboyev. He asked me to call at his place the next day just after midday. I wanted to question Nelly, but put it off till the following morning, insisting that she should go back to bed immediately; the poor child was, tired as she was, waiting up for me, and had fallen asleep only half an hour before my return.

5

In the morning, Nelly told me some rather curious things about the visit that took place the previous evening. As it happened, the very fact that Masloboyev had chosen to call that evening was in itself curious. He knew full well that I'd be out – I clearly remembered mentioning it to him at our last meeting. Nelly said that at first she had been reluctant to let him in because she was frightened; it was eight o'clock in the evening. But he managed to persuade her through the closed door, insisting that if he did not leave me a note that evening, I would be in some kind of trouble the next day. After she had let him in, he immediately wrote the note, approached her and sat down beside her on the settee. "I got up because I didn't want to talk to him," Nelly recounted. "I was very frightened of him. He started telling me about Bubnova, that she was furious, that she wouldn't dare take me back now, and then he started praising you. He said he was great friends with you and knew you when you were a small boy. I began to speak to him then. He brought out some sweets and asked me to take them. I didn't want to. He promised me then that he was a good man and that he could sing songs and dance. He jumped to his feet and started dancing. It made me laugh. Then he said he'd stay for a little while longer, "I'll wait till Vanya comes, he should be back soon," and he kept asking me not to be afraid and sit next to him. I did, but I didn't want to say anything to him. Then he told me he used to know Mummy and Granddad and… then I began to talk. And he stayed ever such a long time."

"So what did you talk about?"

"About Mummy… about Bubnova… about Granddad. He stayed for about two hours."

It seemed Nelly was reluctant to divulge what they had been talking about. I did not question her, hoping to find out everything from Masloboyev. Only it occurred to me that Masloboyev must have come deliberately when I was out in order to catch Nelly on her own. "What would he have wanted to do that for?" I wondered.

She showed me three sweets, which he had given her. They were boiled sweets in red and green wrappers, cheap and nasty, no doubt from a greengrocer's. Nelly burst out laughing as she showed them to me.

"Why didn't you eat them?" I asked.

"I didn't want to," she said seriously, frowning. "I wasn't going to take them from him. He left them on the settee…"

That day I had to call at a great number of different places. I began to say goodbye to Nelly.

"Don't you get bored here on your own?" I asked as I was leaving.

"I do and I don't. I'm bored because you're away for so long." And her gaze was overflowing with tenderness as she spoke. All that morning she had been looking at me with that same soft look, and she appeared so cheerful, so sweet, and at the same time there was something confused, something even bashful in her manner, as though she were afraid to irk me, lose my affection and… and as though she were embarrassed to reveal too much of what she felt.

"And what stops you being bored? After all, you did say, 'I do and I don't,'" I said, smiling involuntarily at her – precious and dear as she was becoming to me.

"I just don't, somehow," she said with a smile, and for some reason became bashful again. We were talking in the doorway. Nelly stood opposite me, her eyes to the ground; she was gripping my shoulder with one hand, with the other picking at the sleeve of my coat.

"Well, is that a secret?" I asked.

"No… not really… I… I started to read your book while you were out," she said in a subdued voice and, looking up at me tenderly but intently, blushed all over.

"Oh, is that it! Well, did you like it?"

I experienced the embarrassment of an author who had been praised to his face, and I would have given God knows what for being able to kiss her at that moment. But somehow it seemed not possible to kiss her. Nelly was silent for a short while.

"Why, why did he die?" she asked with a look of deepest sorrow, darting a glance at me momentarily and lowering her eyes again immediately.

"Who do you have in mind?"

"That man, that young man, with consumption… in the book."

"That's life – it couldn't be helped, Nelly."

"He needn't have died at all," she replied, hardly above a whisper, but somehow precipitately, abruptly, almost resentfully, her lips pouting, and staring at the ground ever more defiantly.

Another minute passed.

"And what about her?… Well, the two of them… the girl and the old man," she went on in her whisper as she continued to pick at my sleeve all the more persistently, "will they go on living together? And they won't be poor?"

"No, Nelly, she will leave for a far-off place. She'll marry a landowner, but he'll be left on his own," I replied with the utmost regret, really sorry that I could not offer her anything more comforting.

"Well… that's too bad! What a shame! If that's so, I don't even want to read on any more now!"

And she pushed my hand aside angrily, turned her back on me abruptly, went over to the table and stood there facing the corner of the room, her eyes glued to the ground. She had gone red in the face and was gasping intermittently, as though in the throes of some dreadful sorrow.

"There, there Nelly, you're angry," I began, coming up closer to her. "You see, none of what's been written is true – it's all made up. So what's there to be cross about! What a sensitive girl you are!"

"I'm not cross," she said meekly, looking up at me so bright-eyed, so lovingly! Then she suddenly seized my hand, nestled her face against my chest and for some reason began to cry.

But she burst out laughing at the same instant – she laughed and she cried – all at once. I too was both on the point of laughing and

experiencing a kind of… sweet gratification. But nothing would make her lift her head, and when I attempted to ease her face away from my shoulder, she clung ever closer and laughed all the more.

Finally this touching scene came to an end. We said goodbye. I was in a hurry. Nelly, flushed all over and coyly reticent, her eyes twinkling like two little stars, ran out after me onto the landing and begged me to be back soon. I promised definitely to return by lunchtime or even earlier.

I called first on the old couple. They were both poorly. Anna Andreyevna was quite ill; Nikolai Sergeich sat in his study. He heard me enter, but I knew he would not emerge for at least a quarter of an hour to give us time to chat together. I did not want to upset Anna Andreyevna too much and therefore toned down my story of what happened the night before as much as possible, but I told the truth; to my surprise, though the old lady was disappointed, she greeted the news of the possible split without undue surprise.

"Well, my dear, I thought as much," she said. "After you'd gone, I was left thinking long and hard, and decided nothing would come of it. We weren't deserving enough in the good Lord's eyes, I suppose, and besides he's a pretty mean sort; what good can you expect of him! Imagine, he wants to take ten thousand roubles from us for nothing He knows he's not entitled to it, but he wants it all the same. He's depriving us of our last crust of bread. Ikhmenevka is going to be sold. But my darling Natasha is perfectly right and very wise not to trust them. And do you know something else, my dear," she continued in a hushed voice, "what's come over my Nikolai Sergeich! He's dead set against this marriage. He can no longer keep quiet about it, 'I won't have it!' he says. At first I thought it was just talk, but he's serious. What will become of her then, the poor darling? He'll curse her for ever then, do you see! Well, and what about that fellow Alyosha, what has he got to say for himself?"

And for a good while yet she persisted with her questions and, as was her wont, hemmed and hawed at my every response. On the whole I noticed that of late she had become quite distracted emotionally. Any kind of news was liable to unsettle her. Her grief over Natasha was robbing her both of her peace of mind and her health.

Ikhmenev entered, in his dressing gown and slippers; he complained of being under the weather, but glanced at his wife with tenderness, and all the time I was with them he was like a nanny to her, looking into her eyes and simply doting on her. His eyes were filled with ineffable tenderness. He was terrified by her illness; he sensed that were he to lose her, he would be bereft of everything on earth.

I sat with them for about an hour. At parting he saw me to the entrance hall and asked me about Nelly. He was seriously considering taking her into their home to fill the place of their daughter. He began to pump me for ideas how to persuade Anna Andreyevna to agree. He was especially curious to know if I had learnt anything new about Nelly. I told him briefly. My story impressed him.

"That's something we'll talk about later," he said resolutely. "In the meantime… on second thoughts, let me come and see you myself as soon as I feel a bit better. We can decide then."

At twelve o'clock sharp I was at Masloboyev's. To my great amazement the first person I met on entering his place was the Prince. He was putting on his coat in the entrance hall and Masloboyev was solicitously handing him his cane. He had spoken to me before of his acquaintanceship with the Prince, nevertheless this encounter astonished me immensely.

The Prince seemed to be taken aback at seeing me.

"Ah, is that you?" he exclaimed with an exaggerated elation. "Imagine, what a coincidence! To be sure, Mr Masloboyev was just telling me you two know each other. I'm glad, glad, ever so glad I met you. I was particularly anxious to see you and call on you as soon as possible, with your permission. I've a favour to ask of you – would you help me, please, and explain our present situation. You probably realize I'm referring to yesterday's events… You're a friend of the family there, you've been following all the developments, you have influence… I'm terribly sorry I can't stop now… Business calls! But in a day or two, or perhaps sooner, I shall have the pleasure of calling on you. As for now…"

He shook my hand rather too heartily, exchanged glances with Masloboyev and left.

"Tell me, for Heaven's sake—" I began as I entered the room.

"Can't tell you a darned thing," Masloboyev interrupted, hurriedly grabbing his cap and heading for the hall, "business calls! I'm in a hurry myself, old chap, I'm late!—"

"But you said in your note, twelve o'clock."

"So what if I did? Yesterday I wrote to you, today someone has written to me, came like a bolt out of the blue – that's the way it goes! They're expecting me. Sorry and all that, Vanya. All I can offer in compensation is to let you give me a thrashing for bothering you unnecessarily. If you want to get your own back – go ahead, but for Christ's sake, hurry up! Don't hold me up, I've things to do, I'm running late—"

"Why on earth would I want to give you a thrashing? If you've got business, go ahead, the unexpected can happen to anyone. Only—"

"No, don't give me *only*," he interrupted me, rushing out into the hall and pulling on his coat. I followed his example. "I've something to discuss with you too. A rather important matter, which is why I called you over in fact. It concerns you directly and all your interests. But as I can't possibly cram it all into one minute flat; why don't you, there's a good chap, give me your word that you'll come tonight at seven on the dot – not before and not after, mind? I'll be in."

"Tonight?" I said, hesitantly. "Tonight I was going to—"

"Go and do now what you were going to do tonight, and tonight come to my place instead, there's a good fellow. Because you've no idea, Vanya, the things I'm going to tell you."

"Well I never! I wonder what it could be! I must say I'm dying to know."

In the meantime we had passed through the house gate and were out on the street.

"So you'll come?" he persisted.

"I said I would."

"No, promise."

"What's come over you? All right, I promise."

"Excellent, spoken like a gentleman. Which way are you going?"

"This way," I said, pointing to the right.

"Well, I'm going the other way," he said, pointing to the left. "See you, Vanya! Don't forget: seven o'clock sharp."

"Strange," I thought to myself as I followed him with my eyes.

I was planning to go to Natasha's that evening. But as I had given my word to Masloboyev, I decided to head for her place now. I was sure I would find Alyosha there. This was indeed so, he was there and was terribly pleased when I entered the room.

He was very charming, extraordinarily affectionate with Natasha and even cheered up on my arrival. Though Natasha tried to put a brave face on it, it was clear this was an effort for her. Her face looked pale and wan. She had clearly had a bad night's sleep. She appeared to be going out of her way to be nice to Alyosha.

Though Alyosha himself talked a great deal and had lots to say in an effort to cheer her up and bring a smile to her face, her lips remained involuntarily pursed in sadness, and he steered clear of mentioning either Katya or his father. Apparently his attempt at reconciliation the previous day had not come off.

"Do you know what? He's dying to get away from me now," Natasha whispered hurriedly when he had gone out briefly to say something to Mavra, "but he hasn't got the courage. I too can't bring myself to tell him to go, else he'll very likely stay in spite of himself, but the thing I'm afraid of most of all is that he'll get bored and turn completely cold towards me! What am I to do?"

"My God, you have got yourselves into a mess! And how mistrustful you both are; neither of you misses a thing the other one does! Why don't you just have it out with him and be done with it! As things stand, he's more than ever liable to get bored."

"So what's to be done?" she exclaimed in a panic.

"Wait, leave it to me…" and I went into the kitchen on the pretext of asking Mavra to give one of my galoshes that had some mud on it a good wipe.

"Be careful, Vanya!" she called after me.

No sooner had I entered than Alyosha simply rushed towards me, as though he had been expecting me.

"Ivan Petrovich, my friend, what am I to do? Help me. I promised Katya yesterday to be at her place today, as a matter of fact – now. I can't possibly let her down! I love Natasha to distraction, I'd do anything for her, but you must agree it wouldn't do to turn my back on everything there—"

"What's the problem, just go…"

"What about Natasha? She'll be hurt, don't you think! Do something, Ivan Petrovich!"

"In my opinion, just go. You know how much she loves you. She won't be able to help thinking how bored you are with her and that you're simply forcing yourself to stay with her. Think nothing of it – that's the best policy. I tell you what, come with me, I'll help you."

"That's really nice of you, Ivan Petrovich! You're so kind!"

We entered. A short while later I said to him, "You know, I've just seen your father."

"Where?" he exclaimed in a panic.

"In the street, quite by chance. He stopped for a minute, and again suggested the two of us should meet. He enquired after you and asked if I knew where you were. He was dying to see you, to tell you something."

"Oh, Alyosha, why don't you go and show yourself to him," Natasha joined in, catching my drift.

"But… where shall I find him now? Is he at home?"

"No, I seem to remember he said he'd be at the Countess's."

"So what shall I do then?…" Alyosha asked naively, looking at Natasha despondently.

"Come, come, Alyosha!" she said. "Do you really want to break off that relationship just to put my mind at rest? That's childish, if you ask me. First, it can't be done, and secondly, it would be the height of churlishness towards Katya. You're friends, and you can't just cut all ties so rudely. In fact, you offend me by supposing that I might be jealous. Go, go immediately, I beg you! It'll put your father's mind at rest too."

"Natasha, you're an angel, and I'm not worth your little finger!" Alyosha exclaimed with excitement and contrition. "You're so kind, whereas I… I… well, I might as well tell you! I had just asked Ivan Petrovich there in the kitchen to help me get away from you. It was his idea really. But don't be too hard on me, my angel Natasha! I'm not altogether to blame, because I love you a thousand times more than anything else in the whole world and that's why I had a new thought – to confide in Katya completely and tell her everything how things stand

between us, and everything that happened yesterday. She's bound to think of something to get us back on an even keel; she's devoted to us heart and soul—"

"Well, off you go then," Natasha replied, smiling, "and there's one other thing, my dearest: I'd like to meet Katya myself. I wonder how that could be arranged?"

Alyosha's excitement knew no bounds. He immediately launched into surmises of how that could be done. In his opinion it would be very simple – Katya would see to it. He enlarged upon his plan with enthusiasm and ardour. He promised to be back with an answer that same day, within a couple of hours, and to spend the rest of the evening with Natasha.

"Are you really going to come?" Natasha asked, seeing him off.

"Don't you trust me? Bye Natasha, goodbye, my beloved – my beloved for ever more! Goodbye, Vanya. Oh, goodness, I called you Vanya inadvertently. Listen, Ivan Petrovich, I'm so fond of you – why aren't we on first-name terms? Let's be on first names!"

"Let's."

"Thank God! I thought of it a hundred times if I thought of it once. But I just couldn't bring myself to say it. It's not so easy. I think Tolstoy depicts it really well somewhere – there are these two characters who want to be on first-name terms and neither dares to be the first. Oh, Natasha! Let's read *Childhood and Youth*[*] again some time – it's such a treat!"

"Be off with you now, go on," Natasha urged him on, laughing. "You're talking too much in your excitement…"

"Bye! I'll be back with you in two hours!"

He kissed her hand and hurried out.

"Did you see, did you see that, Vanya?" she said and burst into tears.

I stayed with her for about two hours and managed to put her mind at rest. Of course she was perfectly right in all her apprehensions. My heart ached with anxiety when I thought of her present situation. I was afraid for her. But what was to be done?

I could not fathom out Alyosha either – his love for her was undiminished, perhaps it was even stronger than previously, more intense, more arduous in its remorse and sense of gratitude. But at the

same time his new passion was taking deep root in his heart. How that would end it was impossible to predict. I myself was most curious to meet Katya. I again promised Natasha I would get to know her.

Towards the end she even managed to cheer up a little. Amongst other things, I told her everything about Nelly, about Masloboyev, about Bubnova, about today's meeting with the Prince at Masloboyev's and about the appointed meeting at seven. She found all this quite fascinating. As for her parents, I tried to be brief, and for the present made no mention of her father's visit to me at all; Nikolai Sergeich's proposed duel with the Prince would more than likely have scared her to death. She too thought it very strange that Masloboyev and the Prince were involved in something together and that the latter should be so eager to see me, although it could all be accounted for in the light of the present circumstances…

I returned home at about three to be greeted by Nelly's radiant face…

6

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK SHARP that evening I was at Masloboyev's. He met me with loud cheers and open arms. Needless to say he was in his cups. But what surprised me most of all were the extraordinary preparations for my visit. It was clear that I was expected. A pretty tombac samovar stood boiling away on a little round table covered with a beautiful expensive tablecloth. The tea service glittered with crystal, silver and porcelain. On another table, covered with a different but no less expensive tablecloth, stood bowls of sweets, mouth-watering Kiev candied fruits and preserves, jam, pastilles, jelly, French confitures, oranges, apples and three or four different kinds of nuts – in a word, a veritable sweet shop. On a third table covered with a snow-white tablecloth were the most sumptuous *zakuski* – caviar, cheese, pâté, cured sausages, a joint of smoked ham, fish – and a range of exquisite crystal decanters with different types of vodka infusions in a variety of attractive colours – green, ruby, tawny and golden. Finally, on a little side table, also covered with a white tablecloth, stood two ice buckets with bottles of champagne, while on a table in front of the couch were three more bottles on show – Sauternes, Lafitte and a bottle of excellent brandy, all from Yeliseyev's and costing the earth. At the tea table sat Alexandra Semyonovna, and though dressed plainly and without frills, it was with the utmost care and in exquisite good taste. She was well aware what suited her and took full pride in this; as I entered, she got up with some ceremony to greet me. Her fresh complexion radiated cheerful gratification. Masloboyev wore a pair of splendid Chinese slippers, a magnificent dressing gown and a freshly laundered elegant

shirt, which was adorned all over with fashionable studs and tassels. His hair was combed flat, pomaded and with a slanted parting, according to the latest fashion.

I was so astonished that I stopped in the middle of the room, staring open-mouthed now at Masloboyev, now at Alexandra Semyonovna, who was bursting with contentment bordering on bliss.

"What's all this, Masloboyev?" I finally exclaimed in surprise. "Are you having a grand party tonight?"

"No, just you," he replied with a flourish.

"But look, this is enough to feed an army," I said, pointing at all the comestibles.

"And to get it drunk – you've forgotten the main thing – to get it drunk!" Masloboyev added.

"And all this just for me?"

"And for Alexandra Semyonovna. It was all her grand idea."

"There you go again! I should have known!" Alexandra Semyonovna exclaimed, blushing, but her look of contentment remaining undiminished. "Can't even entertain a visitor properly – I'm immediately to blame!"

"Since early morning, can you imagine, since early in the morning, the minute she found out you were coming tonight, she started fussing. You should have seen her—"

"Again not true! Not at all since morning, more like since yesterday evening. As soon as you came in last night, you said to me, the gentleman's coming to visit us for the whole evening—"

"You misheard me, Madam."

"Didn't mishear you at all, it's the honest truth. I never lie. And why not give a guest a treat? There we are the two of us, but no one ever comes to see us, and it's not as if we're short of anything. It's only right and proper people should see we can put on as good a show as anybody."

"And, what's more to the point, find out what an excellent housewife and hostess you are," Masloboyev added. "And ask yourself, my dear chap, why should I, why should I have been made to suffer! This fancy linen shirt she's crammed me into, studs all over the place, shoes, Chinese dressing gown, the way she's done and oiled my hair –

bergamot, yes sir! Wanted to sprinkle me with some kind of perfume – crème brûlée or what not, well that's where I dug my heels in, and asserted my conjugal authority—"

"Wasn't bergamot at all, but the best French pomatum there is – comes in a little decorated porcelain jar!" Alexandra Semyonovna interjected, all flushed. "What can I do, Ivan Petrovich, he won't ever take me to the theatre, or dancing, or anywhere – just brings me dresses, and what's the good of dresses? All I can do is put one on and walk around the room by myself. The other day I thought I'd talked him round and we were just about ready to go to the theatre. I merely turned my back on him to fasten a brooch and he's already at the drinks cabinet – one, two down the hatch, and before I knew it he was legless. Didn't go anywhere after that. Nobody, but nobody, nobody at all ever comes to see us. Only in the mornings people sometimes turn up on business, and I'm not wanted then. And yet we've samovars, and a tea service, nice drinking cups too – the lot, all gifts. They bring food along too; wine's about the only thing we buy, and pomade maybe… well, some food too. Actually the pâté, ham and sweets we bought for you ourselves… If only people would come and see how we live! I spent a whole year thinking – wait till a visitor calls, a proper guest, we'll show him the whole works and lay on a feast for him. That way we'd all have fun. But what's the good doing that fool's hair, he's not worth it. He loves walking around like a tramp. Look at that dressing gown he's got on, a gift too, but completely wasted on him! All he thinks of is getting sloshed before he does anything else. Mark my words, he'll be treating you to vodka before he offers tea."

"I say, what a good idea, Vanya! A gold one and a silver one first, and then, suitably oiled, we can get down to sampling the rest."

"Just as I thought!"

"Not to worry, my angel, there'll be plenty of time for tea… to wash down the brandy, to your health!"

"There we go!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "Best China tea, six roubles a go, a dealer brought it the other day, and he wants to drink it with brandy. Don't listen to him, Ivan Petrovich, I'll pour you a glass in a moment… you'll see for yourself what the tea's like!"

And she began to fuss over the samovar.

It was clear the object of the exercise was to detain me for the whole evening. Alexandra Semyonovna, who had been waiting a whole year for a visitor, now wanted to get her fill of me. This was not at all what I had in mind.

"Listen, Masloboyev," I said, taking a seat, "I haven't come on a social call at all. I've come on business. You yourself asked me to come because you had something to tell me—"

"Business is business, but a friendly chat is something else again."

"No, old friend, count me out. Half-past eight and – bye-bye. I've got an appointment. I promised—"

"Out of the question. You can't do that to me! Look what you're doing to Alexandra Semyonovna! Take a look at her – she's going to faint. What was the point of oiling my hair then? I've essence of bergamot on me – don't forget that!"

"You're turning it into a joke, Masloboyev. Alexandra Semyonovna, I swear to you that next week, Friday if you like, I'll come to you for dinner. As for now, old chap, I've promised or, to put it another way, I simply have to be somewhere else. Why don't you just tell me what it is you wanted to say to me?"

"Are you really staying only till half-past eight!" Alexandra Semyonovna exclaimed in a meek and plaintive voice and almost in tears, as she passed me a cup of excellent tea.

"Don't worry, darling, this is all rubbish!" Masloboyev interjected. "He's staying. It's utter rubbish. And how about if you told me, Vanya, where it is you keep going? What business could you be plying, if I may be so bold as to ask? You're off somewhere every day, and don't get any work done—"

"Why do you want to know? On second thoughts, I might very well tell you later. But I'd much rather if you explained why it is you called on me yesterday, after I told you myself, remember, that I was going to be out?

"I remembered later, but yesterday I'd forgotten all about it. There was something I wanted to talk over with you, but the main thing was to butter up my Alexandra Semyonovna. 'There,' she says, 'you've found yourself a decent person, a friend, so why not invite him round?' And I'd already had an earful of this these past four days. This essence

of bergamot, of course, will be enough to expiate forty of my sins in the next world, but that apart, I thought to myself, why not spend a pleasant evening with a pal? So I devised this stratagem – I left you a note to the effect that unless you came to see me, all our plans would go up in smoke."

I asked him not to do this sort of thing in future, but to inform me of his intentions frankly. That said, his explanation left me somewhat unconvinced.

"Well, and why then did you run away from me the other day?"

"The other day I really had an important appointment, and that's telling you the honest truth."

"It wouldn't have been with the Prince, would it?"

"What do you think of our tea?" Alexandra Semyonovna asked in a honeyed voice.

She had been waiting a full five minutes for me to commend her tea, and I just had not twigged.

"Excellent, Alexandra Semyonovna, absolutely delicious! I've never tasted anything like it."

Alexandra Semyonovna's face simply beamed with pleasure, and she rushed to pour me some more.

"The Prince!" Masloboyev exclaimed. "This Prince, my old chap, is a nasty piece of work, a real con man… well! I tell you this much, my dear fellow, even though I'm a con man myself, I swear out of common decency I wouldn't do the things he gets up to! But enough! Mum's the word! That's all I'm going to say about him."

"And he's the very man I came to question you about amongst other things. But of that later. Tell me though, why did you give my Yelena sweets yesterday in my absence and cavort in front of her? And what could you have been talking about with her for an hour and a half!"

"Yelena's a little girl, about eleven or twelve, lives with Ivan Petrovich temporarily," Masloboyev explained, suddenly turning to Alexandra Semyonovna. "Look, Vanya, look," he continued, pointing his finger at her, "the way she just flushed when she heard I gave bonbons to some girl; she's gone all red and started as though we'd fired a gun… look at those eyes blazing like hot charcoal. Jealousy will get you nowhere, Alexandra Semyonovna! My word, aren't we jealous! If I hadn't made

it clear that it was an eleven-year-old, she'd have had me by the short hairs, bergamot or no bergamot!"

"You said it!"

With these words Alexandra Semyonovna fairly bounded from behind the tea table, and before Masloboyev had a chance to shield his head, she had grabbed a tuft of his hair and tugged it with all her might.

"That'll teach you, that'll teach you! Don't you dare say in front of guests that I'm jealous, never, never, never!"

And although she was laughing, she was flushed and Masloboyev did not come off lightly.

"He shouldn't be shaming me so!" she added, turning to me with a serious expression.

"Well, Vanya, such is the life I lead! This, of course, calls for a drink!" Masloboyev observed, smoothing his hair and hurrying almost at full pelt to get to the decanter. But Alexandra Semyonovna beat him to it. She rushed up to the table, filled a glass herself, handed it to him, and even fondled his cheek lovingly. Masloboyev winked at me proudly, clicked his tongue and downed his drink with gusto.

"Apropos these bonbons, I don't quite know what to say," he began, settling himself down beside me on the couch. "I bought them at a greengrocer's three days ago when I was drunk – goodness knows why. Maybe to help the national economy or the confectionery industry – search me! All I remember is that I was walking along the street smashed out of my mind, fell in the mud, tore the hair on my head and cried bitterly that I'm fit for nothing. Naturally I forgot all about the bonbons in my pocket until yesterday, when I felt them as I sat down on your sofa. As for the dancing, there again blame the demon drink. Yesterday I was sloshed, and when I'm sloshed and pleased with my lot in life, I sometimes break into a dance. That's all there is to it, except that the little orphan managed to tug at my heartstrings. But apart from that, she seemed angry and quite reluctant to speak to me. That's when I broke into the dance, to cheer her up, and treated her to the bonbons to sweeten her."

"To sweeten her in order to find out something from her, and – you might as well tell me honestly – did you call at my place deliberately, knowing that I'd be out, so as to have a chat with her eye to eye and fish

something out of her, eh? I know you spent an hour and a half with her, convinced her you knew her deceased mother, and there was something else you wanted to know, wasn't there?"

Masloboyev knitted his eyebrows and smiled roguishly.

"You know, that wouldn't have been such a bad idea at all," he said. "No, Vanya, it's not like that. Mind you, what's wrong with asking a few questions if the timing's right? But that's not the point. Look here, my dear boy, even though I am fairly sloshed, as usual of course, remember this though: Filip will never tell you a *malicious* lie – *malicious*, mark."

"Well, what about non-malicious?"

"All right… not non-malicious either. But to hell with all this, let's have a drink and get down to business! It's hardly worth talking about really," he continued after a drink. "This Bubnova had no right to keep the girl. I checked everything. There's no suggestion of adoption or anything like that. Her mother owed her money, so she simply took the girl. Bubnova may be a fraud and a battleaxe, but she's pretty stupid with it, like all women. Her mother's passport was in order, so everything's above board. Yelena may stay with you, though it'd be an excellent idea if some respectable family were to take her in to give her a decent upbringing. But for the time being let her stay with you. Don't worry, I'll see to everything for you. Bubnova won't be able to do a thing. As for her deceased mother, I didn't manage to find out anything specific. She was a widow – name of Saltzman."

"That's what Nelly told me too."

"Well, that's all there is to it then. And now, Vanya," he resumed with some gravity, "I've a favour to ask of you. I'd be grateful if you'd oblige me. Tell me, in as much detail as possible, what sort of business you run, where you go, where you spend your days. I've heard things and have a rough idea, but I'm after a more detailed picture."

Such an approach surprised me and even put me on my guard.

"What's all this? Why do you need to know? And you're so serious about it—"

"It's like this, Vanya – let's not bandy with words – I want to do you a good turn. You see, my dear friend, if I was up to no good, I'd have been able to get everything out of you without any preambles. And yet

you suspect me of wanting to double-cross you – bonbons and the like. Don't worry, I can see it all. But as I'm making no bones about it, it means I'm going out of my way for your sake, not mine. So, don't be so suspicious and stop beating about the bush, let's have the truth – the whole truth…"

"What good turn? Listen, Masloboyev, why don't you want to tell me something about the Prince? I need to know. That'd be a good turn indeed."

"About the Prince! Hm… Well, all right, I might as well be honest with you – he's the very man I had in mind."

"What?"

"Listen to me! I noticed, old chap, he's been prying into your affairs. Incidentally, he was asking me about you. As to how he found out that we knew each other – that's none of your business. But the main thing is you have to watch the Prince. He's a real Judas, but even worse. Consequently, when I saw him meddling in your affairs I began to be seriously worried for you. Mind you, I know nothing at all – that's precisely why I want you to put me in the picture so that I can form a judgement… In fact, that's exactly why I asked you to come tonight. That is the important matter – take my word for it."

"Won't you at least tell me something – why should I, for instance, be careful of the Prince?"

"Fair enough. You see, sometimes I get hired to do all kinds of things, but the reason people trust me by and large is because I know how to keep my mouth shut. So how would it be for me if I told you everything? You'll pardon me therefore if I speak in general terms, deliberately so, if only to show what an out-and-out scoundrel he really is. Anyway, why don't you have your say first?"

I decided there was absolutely nothing in my affairs I should hide from Masloboyev. Natasha's circumstances were no secret; as it happens, I could expect a certain amount of support from Masloboyev. Nevertheless, there were some points in my story which I largely chose to skirt around. Masloboyev listened particularly carefully to everything that related to the Prince; on many occasions he stopped me, asked me to repeat many things, so that in the end he got a fairly detailed picture. My story lasted about half an hour.

"Hm! That girl's got her head screwed on," Masloboyev concluded. "Even if she hasn't quite cracked the Prince, at least it's good she immediately recognized whom she was up against and has cut all ties with him. Well done, Natalia Nikolayevna! Your health!" (He knocked back a glass.) "It's not just brains one needed for this, but a heart too, to prevent someone double-crossing you. Her heart didn't let her down. It goes without saying, her case is lost – the Prince will get his way and Alyosha'll drop her. It's old Ikhmenev I'm sorry for though – having to pay out ten thousand to that scoundrel! And who represented him, who acted for him? No one but himself, I suppose! My, oh my! These hot-headed, high-minded types! Some people just haven't got any sense! That wasn't the way to deal with the Prince! I'd have found Ikhmenev the best lawyer in town – never mind, though!" And he brought his fist down on the table in exasperation.

"So what about the Prince then?"

"You still on about the Prince, are you? What's the point of talking about him. I wish I'd never volunteered. You see, Vanya, I merely wanted to warn you about that scoundrel, as it were, safeguard you against his influence. You need a long spoon to sup with the devil. So, be on your guard – that's all. No doubt you expected me to come up with some tale of mystery and suspense. You're not a novelist for nothing! Well, what's the point of talking about the villain? Once a villain, always a villain… So, for argument's sake, let me just tell you one of the things he got up to, obviously without specifying either places, faces or calendar details. You know when he was still a lad, eking out an existence on a meagre office clerk's salary, he went and married a wealthy merchant's daughter. Well, he treated her none too gently, and though that's neither here nor there at the moment, I'll say this to you, Vanya my friend, that's how he liked to operate most of the time. Here's another instance – he went on a trip abroad. There—"

"Hold it, Masloboyev, what trip are you talking about? What year was that?"

"Precisely ninety-nine years and three months ago. Well, there he seduced someone's daughter and whisked her off to Paris with him. And how did he go about it! The father was some kind of an industrialist or a partner in some enterprise or other. I'm not too sure. All I can tell you

are my own conjectures and deductions based on various facts. Anyway, he wormed his way into the father's business and proceeded to diddle him. He strung him along and took money off him. The old man, of course, kept certain receipts to the effect. The Prince, naturally, had no intention of paying him back. To put it bluntly – he simply meant to steal it. Now the old boy had a daughter, and very beautiful she was, and she had a lover, an upstanding chap, a knight in shining armour, a veritable Schiller, a poet and a merchant to boot, a young dreamer – in a word, a German through and through, Pfefferkuchen or something like that."

"You mean Pfefferkuchen was his name?"

"Well, maybe not Pfefferkuchen, who cares, that's neither here nor there. What matters is that the Prince started making up to the daughter, and so craftily that she was soon head over heels in love with him. There were two things the Prince was after: first to hang on to the daughter, and secondly to lay his hands on the receipts for the money that the old boy had advanced. The keys to all his safes were with his daughter, whom he loved to distraction, so much so that he wouldn't even hear of her getting married. Seriously. He was jealous of any suitor, couldn't imagine parting from her, and even kicked Pfefferkuchen out on his ear, a bit of a queer fish, an Englishman…"

"An Englishman? So where did all this take place?"

"I only said it in a manner of speaking, you don't have to take everything literally. So it happened in Santa Fe de Bogotá, or perhaps in Cracow, but more likely than not in the Duchy of Nassau, what's written on this here bottle of seltzer water, yes Nassau, that's right – you'll be the death of me, Vanya! Well, having seduced this girl, the Prince spirits her away from her father, and on the Prince's insistence she grabs a document or two with her. That's what love does for you, Vanya! And make no mistake, she was a decent, deserving, perfectly honest sort! All right, so perhaps she wasn't all that clued up as regards legal documents. She was only concerned with one thing – her father would curse her for it. But the Prince knew how to deal with that one too – he gave her a formal, legal undertaking to marry her. As a result he managed to set her mind at rest that they'd both go away on a short holiday trip, and after the old boy's anger had subsided, they'd return

to him duly married and the three of them would live together happily ever after for all eternity. She did actually elope, the old man cursed her and promptly went bankrupt. Young Frauenmilch immediately dashed after her to Paris, leaving behind everything, his business included – all for the love of her."

"Hold on! What Frauenmilch?"

"Well, you know whom I mean! Feuerbach… oh, hell – Pfefferkuchen! There was of course no chance of the Prince getting married, for what would Countess Khlestova say? What would Baron Hogwash think? Consequently he had to resort to chicanery. And he set about it pretty ruthlessly. First, he as near as damnit physically assaulted her. Secondly, he deliberately invited Pfefferkuchen to his house, who came, grew more and more attached to her, and so the two of them snivelled and spent their time together, evenings on end, bemoaning their misfortunes, as he tried to comfort her. Bless the poor souls! But the Prince had it all worked out. He caught them together late one night, used it as a pretext and accused them of having an affair. He claimed he saw it all with his own eyes, and booted them both out on the street. Then he went to stay in London for a while. Meantime she went into labour, and no sooner had she been turned out, she gave birth to a girl… what am I saying, not a girl, a boy, that's right – a son, whom they christened Volodya. Pfefferkuchen was the godfather. So the two of them set off on a tour. Pfefferkuchen had a bit of money saved up. They travelled all over Switzerland, Italy… she got to see all the romantic spots, as well she might. She spent most of the time crying, while Pfefferkuchen whined and complained, and many years rolled by that way, and the little girl grew up. And everything would have been just right for the Prince, except for one thing – she wouldn't release him from his promise to marry her. 'You're a cad, sir,' she said to him on parting, 'you robbed me, you dishonoured me and now you're deserting me. Goodbye then! But you're not going to get that piece of paper back. Not because I may want to marry you some day, but because you're afraid of that document. So let it stay in my hands for ever more.' In short, she let off some of her steam, but the Prince wasn't too bothered. As it happens, such scoundrels always come out on top when dealing with these all too conscientious souls. They're so honourable they're

asking to be duped, and secondly, rather than being brutally practical and, if possible, bringing the full force of the law to bear on the matter, they prefer to take refuge in virtuous and noble indignation. Well, so it was with this young mother, if only to illustrate the point. She took refuge in noble indignation and, though she kept the document, the Prince knew full well that she'd rather die than confront him with it, and he thought no more about it. As for her, even though she showed him up for what he was, she was still left with little Volodya on her hands. Were she to die, what would become of him? But this point was not considered. Bruderschaft also encouraged her but did damn all. They spent their time reading Schiller and the like. Finally, Bruderschaft went down with something, turned turtle and died—"

"You mean Pfefferkuchen?"

"Well yes, to hell with him! And she—"

"Hang on! How many years did they travel about?"

"Two hundred if a day. Well, she returned to Cracow. Her father wouldn't have her back, put the mockers on her, she died, and the Prince thanked the heavens above and wept for joy.

Drinking is healthy for young and for old
In the heat of summer, or the freezing cold…

"Let's drink to it, Vanya!"

"I've a feeling you're in league with the Prince on this, Masloboyev."

"You'd like me to be, wouldn't you?"

"The only thing I can't understand is where you come into all this!"

"Look here, when she returned to Madrid after a ten-year absence under an assumed name, there was no end of things to be looked into – Bruderschaft, the old man, whether she was in fact back, what had become of the kid, if she was in fact still alive or not, if any legal documents had been left behind, and so on and so forth ad infinitum. And a few other things besides. The man is bad news, be careful of him, Vanya, but as for Masloboyev, remember one thing – never ever call him a scoundrel! He may well be one (who isn't, if you ask me?), but not as far as you're concerned. I'm thoroughly sloshed, but listen:

should you ever feel – be it far, be it near, be it now, or the year after – that Masloboyev has been too clever by half with you (and, please, mark these words: *too clever by half*), remember, it was without malice aforethought. Masloboyev's watching over you. And therefore don't believe everything you hear, but just come straight over to Masloboyev and have a heart-to-heart talk with him without beating about the bush. And so how about a drink now?"

"No, thank you."

"A bite to eat?"

"No, you must excuse me…"

"Well, clear off then, it's quarter to nine, you're too proud. It's time you went."

"What's all this? What's going on?" Alexandra Semyonovna exclaimed almost in tears. "He's had one too many and wants to boot his guest out! He's always like that! For shame!"

"It's no good blowing against the wind! Alexandra Semyonovna, the two of us will just have to stay behind and content ourselves with each other's company! Who are we compared to such a general! No, Vanya, I tell a lie – you're no general, but I am a scoundrel! Just look at me now! What am I compared to you? Forgive me, Vanya, and let me pour my heart out…"

He embraced me and burst into tears. I started to make my way out.

"Goodness gracious! And supper is all ready," Alexandra Semyonovna said, utterly distressed. "But will you come to us on Friday?"

"I will, Alexandra Semyonovna, honestly, I will."

"Perhaps you'll take offence at him being like that?… Drunk. Don't blame him for it though, Ivan Petrovich, he's kind, ever so kind, and he's so fond of you! He never stops talking about you day and night, it's all I ever hear. He went out specially to buy your books for me. I haven't had a chance to read them yet. I'll start on them tomorrow. It'll be such a treat for me when you come! I never see anybody, nobody ever comes to visit us. We're not short of anything, but we always stay in on our own. I was sitting just now, listening, hanging on your every word, and it was so nice… So, till Friday then…"

7

I HURRIED HOME. MASLOBOYEV'S WORDS had caused me a great deal of surprise. All kinds of unlikely thoughts crowded into my head… Quite unexpectedly, as I drew near my home an incident occurred, which shook me as though I'd been given an electric shock.

Directly opposite the house where I lodged stood a street lamp. Just as I drew level with the gate, a strange figure suddenly rushed at me from under the lamp, which made me cry out; a quivering, frightened, half-demented creature caught hold of my hand with a shriek of distress. I was terror-stricken. It was Nelly!

"Nelly! What's the matter with you?" I cried out. "What's wrong!"

"There, upstairs… he's there… in our room…"

"Who? Come along! We'll go together."

"I don't want to, I don't want to! I'll wait till he's gone… in the passage… I don't want to."

I ascended the stairs with some strange premonition, opened the door and – there was the Prince. He was sitting at the table and reading my novel. At least, the book was open.

"Ivan Petrovich!" he exclaimed joyfully. "I'm so glad you have returned at last. I was just about to give up. I've been waiting for you over an hour. I promised the Countess today, who was most insistent and persuasive, that I should bring you to see her tonight. She's so anxious to make your acquaintance! Since you had already promised me, I decided to call on you personally, without delay, before you went out, and invite you along. You can imagine my disappointment when on arrival your servant girl informed me that you had already gone out.

What was I to do? I had given a solemn promise to bring you with me, and so sat down to wait – it was going to be just a quarter of an hour. It turned into a long quarter of an hour though! I opened your book and became engrossed. Ivan Petrovich! This is a masterpiece! You have not been appreciated enough! You have moved me to tears. I cried over this, and it is not often I cry…"

"So you want me to come with you? I have to admit though… it's not that I'm unwilling, but…"

"I beg you in all earnestness, come along! You'll do me an injustice otherwise! You know, I've been waiting for you an hour and a half!… Besides, I need, I really need to talk to you – you do know what it's about, don't you? You know the ins and outs of the case better than I… Perhaps we may come to some decision, find a solution. Please, think about it! I beg you not to refuse!"

I sized up the situation and realized that I would have to go there sooner or later. True enough, Natasha was on her own now and needed me, but did she herself not ask me to get to know Katya as soon as possible? Besides, Alyosha himself might well be there… I knew that Natasha would not rest till I brought her news of Katya, and I decided to go. But I was worried about Nelly.

"Please excuse me for a moment," I said to the Prince and went out on the landing. Nelly was standing close by in a dark corner.

"Why don't you want to come in, Nelly? What has he done to you? What has he been saying to you?"

"Nothing… I don't want to, I don't want to…" she kept repeating. "I'm frightened…"

No matter how hard I tried to persuade her, it was to no avail. We managed to agree that as soon as the Prince and I had left, she would go into the room and lock the door behind her.

"And don't let anyone in, Nelly, no matter how much they might ask you!"

"And are you going with him?"

"Yes."

She shuddered and grabbed my hand, as though wishing to dissuade me from going, but did not say a word. I decided I would question her more closely about it the next day.

Having apologized to the Prince, I started to get ready. He began to assure me that there was no need to get changed or spruce up at all. "Perhaps something bright and fresh!" he remarked, looking me up and down critically. "You know these social conventions… one cannot of course ignore them altogether. It'll be a good while yet before our society reaches that peak of perfection," he concluded, pleased to see that I had a tailcoat.

We went out. But I left him on the stairs and went back to the room, which Nelly had already managed to slip into, to say goodbye to her again She was terribly agitated. Her face had turned blue. I was worried about her; it was hard for me to leave her.

"She's strange that servant girl of yours," the Prince said as we descended the stairs. "I take it she is your servant?"

"No… she… she is just staying with me for the time being."

"Extraordinary girl! I'm sure she's quite demented. Imagine, she spoke to me normally at first, but later, having looked me over, rushed towards me crying out something, shaking all over, dug her fingers into me… tried to say something, but couldn't. I'll be honest with you, I felt a little uneasy and had a good mind to take to my heels but, thank God, she left me first. I was astonished. How can you put up with her?"

"She's epileptic," I replied.

"Is that so? Well, it's not surprising then… if she has fits."

Something immediately aroused my suspicions: Masloboyev's visit the previous day even though he knew I would be out; my visit to Masloboyev that morning; his invitation to me for seven o'clock; the story he told me reluctantly in an inebriated state; his attempts at persuading me to trust him; and finally, the Prince waiting for me an hour and a half perhaps in the full knowledge that I was at Masloboyev's, with Nelly dashing away from him into the street – all this was somehow interconnected. There was indeed much to ponder over.

His calash was waiting outside by the gate. We got in and drove off.

8

IT WAS NOT FAR, ONLY AS FAR as the Torgovy Bridge. For the first few minutes we were silent. I wondered how he would start the conversation. I suspected he would want to probe me, try me, sound me out, but instead, without any preamble, he went straight to the point.

"There's something which bothers me now a great deal, Ivan Petrovich," he began, "something I'd like to discuss with you as a matter of priority and pick your brains – I've long since decided to ignore the court's decision in the case I won and to let Ikhmenev have the disputed ten thousand roubles. How am I to do it?"

The thought immediately flashed through my mind: "Surely you must know what to do, unless you're just pulling my leg!"

"I don't know, Prince," I replied, trying to sound as non-committal as possible, "in anything else, namely in whatever concerns Natalya Nikolayevna, I would be quite ready to help you with any information likely to be of use both to you and to us, but in this particular matter you yourself of course know more than I do."

"No, not at all, much less in fact. You know them, and perhaps Natalya Nikolayevna herself has spoken to you on the matter on a number of occasions, and that for me would be the main consideration. You can help me a great deal – the matter is extremely awkward. I'm prepared to let him have the money – as a matter of fact, I've made up my mind to do so however subsequent events might turn out, you understand? But how, in what guise do I present my concession, that is the question. The old man is proud and stubborn. He might well spurn my generosity and throw the money back in my face."

"I beg your pardon, but do you consider the money to be his or yours?"

"I won the case, consequently, mine."

"But morally?"

"Of course, mine," he replied, somewhat taken aback by my bluntness. "But it looks to me as though you don't quite realize what's entailed. I'm not accusing Ikhmenev of premeditated deception and, let me make it clear to you, never did. He brought the trouble upon his own head. He was guilty of negligence, of mismanaging the business entrusted to him and, according to our original agreement, was answerable for some of this. But, do you know, it's not even a question of that – it's our quarrel that is at the bottom of everything, the mutual insults we traded, in a word – our wounded self-esteem. I might easily have ignored that wretched ten thousand roubles, but of course you know how and why the whole of this matter originated. I agree, I was mistrustful, I was perhaps wrong (wrong at the time, that is), but I didn't realize it and, in a moment of desperation, smarting from his insults, I took the opportunity and instituted proceedings. All this may strike you as perhaps not quite honourable on my part. I'm not justifying myself – all I'll say is that anger and, above all, disaffected pride ought not to be confused with lack of honour, they are quite natural, human traits. And, I confess and repeat, having practically no idea what sort of a man Ikhmenev was, I took on trust all those rumours about his daughter and Alyosha, and consequently could easily have believed in the premeditated theft of the money… but never mind all that. The most important thing is what to do now? To turn the money down? But if I say in the same breath that I still consider my case to have been justified, I'm making him a gift of it. On top of that there's also Natalya Nikolayevna's delicate position to consider… He's bound to fling the money back in my face."

"There you are, you said it yourself: *fling* – consequently you regard him as an honest man and can therefore be quite sure he did not steal your money. And if so, why not just go to him and declare openly that you consider your case was invalid? That would be an honourable act, and Ikhmenev would perhaps not find it difficult to take *his own* money."

"Hm… *his own* money – there's the rub. What are you doing to me? To go to him and explain that I consider my case was invalid? So why then did you sue if you knew you had no case to answer? That's what everyone will say to my face. And it would be unfair, because my case was valid. I never said nor wrote anywhere that he stole. But of his carelessness, lack of judgement and bad management I'm still convinced to this day. This money is unquestionably mine, and therefore it hurts to be putting myself deliberately in the wrong and, finally, Ikhmenev, I repeat, brought it all upon himself, and you're now urging me to seek his pardon for his own misdeeds – that's hard."

"It seems to me if two people want to make peace, then…"

"Then it's easily done, you think?"

"Yes."

"No, sometimes not at all, the more so since—"

"The more so since it's bound up with other considerations. In this I fully agree with you, Prince. You must resolve the relationship between Natalya Nikolayevna and your son in all matters for which you are responsible, and resolve it to the full satisfaction of the Ikhmenevs. Only then will you also be able to settle equitably the question of the lawsuit with Ikhmenev. Whereas now, while everything is still up in the air, you have only one course – to own up to the unfairness of your action, and to own up openly and, if necessary, publicly. That's my opinion. I'm being honest with you, because you yourself asked me what I thought and would surely not wish me to dissemble. This, as it happens, emboldens me to ask you something – why are you so bothered about returning the money to Ikhmenev? If you consider right to be on your side, why give it back? Pardon my curiosity, but this is very much bound up with other considerations—"

"But what do you think," he suddenly asked me, as though he had not even heard my question at all, "are you sure old Ikhmenev would turn down the ten thousand, even if it was handed to him without any preambles and… and… and without any conciliatory remarks?"

"Of course, he would!"

I was scarcely able to contain myself and even shook with indignation. This brazenly sceptical question was tantamount to the Prince spitting in my face. One offence was compounded by another – by the

discourteous, supercilious manner with which, without replying to my question and as though not deigning to notice it, he overrode it with one of his own, apparently indicating that I had overreached myself and had become excessively familiar in venturing to pose such questions. I simply loathed the arrogance of it all, and in the past had gone out of my way to dissuade Alyosha from resorting to such tactics.

"Hm… you're too impulsive, and some things in this world do not unravel quite as you expect them to," the Prince observed calmly in response to my outburst. "If you ask me, I think Natalya Nikolayevna could well come up with a solution to this problem. Mention it to her. She could well have some sound advice to offer."

"Not on your life," I replied brusquely. "You did not deign to listen to what I was about to say and interrupted me. Natalya Nikolayevna will understand that if you return the money in bad faith and without, as you call it, *conciliatory remarks*, it would mean you're paying her father for his daughter, and her for Alyosha – in a word, you're resorting to bribery…"

"Hm… is this how you see it, my kind Ivan Petrovich." The Prince burst out laughing. Why did he laugh? "And yet," he continued, "there's still so much, so much the two of us have to discuss. But we haven't the time now. All I'll ask you is to appreciate *one thing* – this matter concerns directly Natalya Nikolayevna and her entire future, and to some extent it all depends on what understanding the two of us will reach and what conclusions we come to. You are indispensable in this matter – you'll see for yourself. And therefore, if you have Natalya Nikolayevna's best interests at heart, you cannot refuse to communicate with me, however little sympathy you might have for me. But we've arrived… *A bientôt!*"*

9

THE COUNTESS LIVED IN SPLENDID STYLE. The rooms were tastefully decorated and well appointed, without being ostentatious. There prevailed, however, an overall air of temporary sojourn; it was merely a comfortable residence to meet the needs of the moment rather than the permanent, established home of a wealthy family displaying the characteristics of the landed gentry with all their whims attended to. Rumour had it that the Countess was to retire for the summer to her estate (bankrupt and remortgaged) in the Simbirsk district, and that the Prince was to accompany her. I had already heard about this and it was painful for me to think what Alyosha might do after Katya had left with the Countess. I was too afraid to raise this with Natasha, but, judging by certain indications, I could see she too was aware of this rumour. However, she said nothing and suffered in silence.

The Countess greeted me most affably; she shook my hand warmly and confirmed that she had been wishing to make my acquaintance for some time now. She herself poured the tea from a splendid silver samovar, round which we all sat – the Prince, I and a certain very upper-crust gentleman, advanced in years and somewhat starched in appearance, with the polished manners of a diplomat, sporting a medal in the shape of a star. This guest was treated very deferentially. The Countess on her return from abroad had not yet had time during the winter season to establish any important contacts in St Petersburg society or to secure for herself the sort of position which she desired and expected. Apart from this gentleman there were no other visitors during the course of the entire evening. I glanced round in search of Katerina

Fyodorovna; she was in another room with Alyosha, but on hearing that we had arrived, she immediately came to join us. The Prince kissed her hand courteously, and the Countess drew her attention to me. The Prince immediately introduced us. I studied her with rapt attention. She was a sweet, fair-haired girl, dressed in white, petite, with calm and composed features, striking blue eyes and, as Alyosha had said, in the bloom of youth – but that's all. I had expected to find a stunning beauty, but that she certainly was not. A regular, softly defined oval-shaped face, fairly regular features, thick, truly wonderful hair done in a homely unpretentious style, a calm steady look in her eyes – if I'd met her somewhere I'd have walked straight past without a second glance – but this was only after my initial impression and later that evening I managed to gain a deeper insight into her. The very manner in which she shook my hand while continuing to gaze into my eyes with a kind of intense concentration, without uttering a word, caught me completely unawares by its ingenuousness, and I could not suppress a smile. I sensed immediately that I was faced with a creature pure of heart. The Countess was observing her intently. After shaking my hand, Katya drew back somewhat hastily and sat down at the other end of the room next to Alyosha. On greeting me, Alyosha said in a whisper, "I'm here only for a minute, after that I'm leaving."

The "diplomat" – I don't know his name, and I'm calling him that merely for want of something better – spoke calmly and weightily, expounding some idea of his. The Countess listened to him attentively. The Prince nodded with approval and smiled ingratiatingly; the speaker often turned to him, apparently recognizing in him a worthy listener. I was given a cup of tea and left to my own devices, for which I was very grateful. In the meantime I kept an attentive eye on the Countess. At first impression, in spite of myself, I couldn't help liking her. Perhaps she was no longer in the first flush of youth, but to me she did not look a day older than twenty-eight. Her complexion was still fresh and, in days gone by, in her early youth, she must have been truly beautiful. Her dark auburn hair was still quite thick; the look in her eyes was extraordinarily kind, but somehow provocatively playful and roguishly derisive. For the present she seemed to hold herself in check for some reason. Her expression conveyed a keen intelligence, but most of all

kindness and joy. It seemed to me that her dominant characteristic was a certain frivolity, a yearning for pleasure, and there was an aura of innocuous selfishness about her, which might perhaps have been not so innocuous after all. She was in thrall to the Prince, who exerted an extraordinary influence on her. I knew they maintained a liaison; I had heard also that he was a not altogether jealous lover during their stay abroad, but it always seemed to me then – as indeed it still does – that they were bound to each other not merely by ties from the past, but that there was something else, something rather mysterious, something like a covenant between them, based on some mutual scheme – in a word, there must have been something of the kind. I knew also that at that particular time the Prince was weary of her; nonetheless they would not sever their relationship. Perhaps at the time they were both particularly caught up in their designs on Katya, which of course were initiated by the Prince. It was on this basis that the Prince had managed to avoid marrying the Countess, who had really pressed him to do so, and had instead persuaded her to support the proposed marriage between her stepdaughter and Alyosha. That, at least, was what I surmised from Alyosha's earlier naive accounts, something that hadn't escaped even his notice. I was also very much aware, partly from the same source, that the Prince had, despite the fact that the Countess was totally under his sway, some reason for being afraid of her. Even Alyosha had noted this. I subsequently learnt that the Prince was eager for the Countess to marry someone else and it was partly for this reason that he was dispatching her to the Simbirsk district, hoping to match her up with someone eligible in the provinces.

I sat and listened, hoping to have a tête-à-tête with Katerina Fyodorovna as soon as possible. The diplomat was replying to some of the Countess's questions regarding the current state of politics, the incipient reforms* and whether there were any grounds to fear them. He spoke in measured tones and at length, as befits someone belonging to the ruling class. He argued his point subtly and intelligently, but the underlying idea was perfectly abhorrent. In particular, he insisted that this whole spirit of reform and improvement would all too soon bear the usual fruits; that on seeing these, people would come to their senses and that in society (it goes without saying, in certain circles) this new

spirit would not only wane, but that in the real world people would realize the error of their ways and rally with redoubled effort in support of the established order; that this social experiment, unfortunate though it might be, would prove to be very salutary in that it would be an object lesson for bolstering the beneficent old order, provide new grounds for doing so – and consequently, it should even be advantageous that the critical state of irresponsibility be brought to a head all the more expeditiously. "*We* are indispensable." he concluded. "Without us no society has ever survived. We shall not be vanquished – quite the contrary, we shall be victorious in the end; we shall overcome, we shall ascend, and our slogan at this time should be *pire ça va, mieux ça est.*"* The Prince grinned at him in feigned sympathy. The orator was well pleased with himself. I was foolish enough to want to protest; I was seething with indignation. But I was stopped in my tracks by a malicious glance from the Prince that momentarily flashed in my direction, and it struck me that what he was expecting was precisely some gauche juvenile reaction on my part – perhaps that was what he wanted most of all, just for the sheer pleasure of seeing me compromise myself. At the same time I was perfectly sure that the diplomat would hardly have acknowledged my intervention, nor perhaps even my very presence. I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable sitting amongst them, but then Alyosha saved the day.

He approached me quietly, touched me on the shoulder and asked if he could have a couple of words with me. I guessed that he had been sent by Katya. I was quite right. A moment later I was already sitting beside her. At first she looked me over intently from head to toe, as though saying to herself, "So that's what you're like," and for a minute or so we were lost for words to start a conversation. However, I was certain that all she needed was to break the ice, after which there'd be no stopping her till the small hours perhaps. The five, six hours of talking, which Alyosha had mentioned, flashed through my mind. Alyosha was sitting close by, waiting impatiently for us to begin.

"Now you've met, why don't you say something?" he enquired, looking at us with a smile. "Don't just sit there!"

"Oh, Alyosha, really… we shall," Katya replied. "There's so much for us to discuss, Ivan Petrovich, I hardly know where to begin. We're

getting to know each other rather late in the day – if only it had been sooner, though I feel I've known you for ages. I was so anxious to see you. I even thought of writing to you…"

"What about?" I asked, smiling involuntarily.

"Any number of things," she replied in all seriousness. "For one, is he telling the truth about Natalya Nikolayevna when he says she doesn't mind being left on her own at a time like this? I ask you, how can he do it? Look, why are you still here, tell me, please?"

"Oh my God, I'm going straight away. Didn't I tell you I'd stay here just long enough for you two to start talking to each other, and then I'd be off?"

"Now you've seen us sitting together – are you satisfied? It's always the same with him," she added, blushing slightly and pointing her finger at him. "'One minute,' he always says, 'just one more minute,' and before you know where you are, it's already midnight and it's too late to go anywhere. 'She doesn't mind,' he says, 'she's so kind.' That's his excuse! Is that fair? Is that proper, I ask you?"

"I'd better go then," Alyosha replied forlornly, "only I'd really have liked to stay with you two a little…"

"What on earth for? Can't you understand, we've lots to discuss in private. Listen, don't be cross. It's awfully important – be reasonable!"

"Well, if it's like that, I'll be off… what's there to be cross about? I'll just drop in at Levenka's for a second, and then go on to her place immediately. I say, Ivan Petrovich," he continued, picking up his hat, "you do know, don't you, that Father wants to turn down the money he won in his lawsuit against Ikhmenev?"

"I do. He told me."

"How generous of him! You see, Katya doesn't believe that he's behaving like a gentleman. Talk to her about it! Goodbye Katya, and please trust me that I love Natasha. And why are you all imposing these conditions on me, reproaching me and spying on me, as though I were under surveillance? She knows how much I love her, and she trusts me implicitly, and I'm confident she has confidence in me. I love her for her own sake, irrespective of any commitments. I don't know how I love her. I simply do. And therefore there's no need to interrogate me like a suspect. Go on, ask Ivan Petrovich now he's here, and he'll confirm that

Natasha is jealous, and that even though she loves me very much, she's very selfish too, for she won't make the least sacrifice for me."

"I beg your pardon!" I said in surprise, hardly believing my ears.

"Come, come, Alyosha!" Katya fairly gasped, clasping her hands.

"Of course, what's so surprising about that? Ivan Petrovich knows. She keeps insisting I stay with her all the time. Well, not in so many words, but it's clear that's what she wants."

"Shame on you!" Katya said, flushed with anger.

"What's there to be ashamed of? You're strange, Katya, you really are! Look here, I love her more than she imagines, and if only she loved me the way I love her, she'd surely have sacrificed her own gratification for my sake. True enough, she doesn't exactly tie me down, but I can see by her face that it's not easy for her; consequently, as far as I'm concerned it's tantamount to being tied down."

"My word, there's more to this than meets the eye!" Katya exclaimed, turning to me again with an angry glint in her eyes. "Let's have the truth, Alyosha, the whole truth immediately, it's your father who's behind all this, isn't it? He's been talking to you today? And please, don't try to be smart with me! I'll get to the bottom of this directly! Yes or no?"

"Yes, he has," Alyosha replied, embarrassed, "and what of it? When he spoke to me today he was so kind, so supportive, and he never stopped praising her, which came as a bit of a surprise to me – after all, she'd offended him badly, and there he was lauding her to the skies."

"And you, you believed him," I said, "you, you for whose sake she had given up everything she could, and even now, this very day, she was concerned only about you, to make sure you were happy and that you shouldn't miss a chance of seeing Katerina Fyodorovna! She told me this herself today. And here you are being taken in by all this hypocritical cant! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Ungrateful boy! What's the use, he doesn't know the meaning of the word shame!" Katya said with a resigned shake of her hand, as though he were a totally hopeless case.

"Honestly, what's the matter with you!" Alyosha went on in a plaintive tone. "You're always like that, Katya! You always see the worst in me… never mind Ivan Petrovich! You think I don't love

Natasha. That's not what I had in mind when I said she was selfish. What I meant was that she loves me altogether too much, out of all proportion, which makes it difficult both for me and her. As for Father, he'd never be able to pull the wool over my eyes, even if he wanted to. I just won't let him. Nor did he mean she was selfish in any bad sense – that much I could tell. He said precisely what I'm saying now – that she's so deeply, so hopelessly in love with me that it simply amounts to selfishness, which makes it difficult both for her and me, and eventually it'll be worse still for me. Let's face it, he was only speaking the truth out of love for me, and it doesn't at all follow that he meant to offend Natasha – quite the opposite, he saw that she was full of the deepest love, love without measure, an impossible kind of love—"

But Katya interrupted him, not allowing him to finish. She began to rebuke him passionately, insisting that his father had started to praise Natasha precisely in order to mislead him by his sham sympathy, and all in order to drive a wedge between them, in order subtly to turn Alyosha himself against her without his even realizing it. She pleaded Natasha's case skilfully and passionately, pointing out that no love could endure the way he was treating her – and that it was he, Alyosha, who was the real egoist. Little by little Katya brought him to the brink of despondency and total repentance; he sat before us, staring at the ground, no longer replying to anything, completely broken and with a pained expression on his face. But Katya was implacable. I observed her with the utmost curiosity. I wanted to get to know this strange girl as soon as possible. She was a complete child, but a strange, a *committed* child, with firmly rooted convictions and an ardent, innate love for probity and justice. Even if she really could be called a child, she belonged to the *thinking* kind, not uncommon in our society. It was evident that she had already pondered greatly on things, and it would have been most interesting to take a look into that reflective mind of hers, so as to observe how totally childish ideas and fancies intermingled there with serious real-life impressions and observations (because Katya had already experienced life at first hand), as well as with notions as yet quite unfamiliar to her, not yet experienced by her directly but which had captured her imagination, in great number no doubt, perhaps vicariously from books, and which she probably

mistook for the result of her own life's experience. Throughout that evening and subsequently I think I got to know her pretty well. Her heart was eager and susceptible. On occasion, she appeared to be disdainfully reluctant to control her emotions and, putting truth before everything else, regarded – it would seem with pride – all social conventions as arbitrary impositions, as is often the case with exuberant people, even those of more mature years. It was in fact this that lent her an especial charm. She loved to think and to seek after truth, but was so broad-minded with it, so uninhibited and childlike, that one could not help immediately accepting and even admiring all her idiosyncrasies. I called to mind Levenka and Borenka, and it seemed to me to be all of a piece. And, strange to say – her face, in which at first sight I did not detect anything especially wonderful, appeared to me ever more exciting and attractive as the evening wore on. This naive combination of a child and a mature woman, this unsophisticated and altogether authentic quest for truth and fairness and unshakeable faith in her aspirations – all this illuminated her face with some kind of wonderful glow of sincerity, lent it some elevated, spiritual beauty, and it began to dawn on me that of necessity it would always take some little time to appreciate such beauty fully, as it would never reveal itself in its entirety to the first casual, insensitive gaze. And I understood why Alyosha had become very attached to her. If he could not think and argue for himself, he loved those who thought and even willed on his behalf, and Katya had already taken him under her wing. He was pure of heart and upstanding, ready to surrender wholeheartedly to all that was fair and splendid, and Katya had already drawn him deep into her confidence with all the sincerity and warmth of youth. He did not have a whit of personal willpower, whereas she was endowed with a stubborn, strong and finely attuned resoluteness, and Alyosha could become attached only to one who could rule, not to say dominate him. This is partly how Natasha had drawn him to her at the beginning of their relationship, but Katya had a greater advantage over Natasha in that she herself was yet but a child and, it would seem, was destined to remain so for a long time to come. This childishness of hers, her lucid mind and at the same time a distinct absence of sophistication – all this was somehow more akin to Alyosha. He felt this, and therefore Katya

attracted him ever more. I am certain that when they talked one to one, one minute Katya could be making one of her serious, "propagandist" speeches, and the next they could easily be playing with toys. And though in all probability Katya very often reprimanded Alyosha and already had a firm grip on him, he was evidently more at ease with her than with Natasha. They were more of a *match*, and that's what mattered most.

"That'll do, Katya, enough of that, stop it. You always turn out to be in the right, and not me. It's because your soul is purer than mine," Alyosha said, getting up and shaking her hand in parting. "I'm off to her immediately, and I shan't call on Levenka…"

"Levenka has nothing at all to offer you. But it's awfully sweet of you to do as you're told and visit Natasha now."

"And you're a thousand times sweeter than anyone," Alyosha replied disconsolately. "Ivan Petrovich, a couple of words with you."

We stepped aside.

"I behaved despicably today," he whispered to me. "I was a cad, I'm guilty before all the world, but especially those two. This afternoon my father introduced me to Alexandrina – she's French, you understand – a delightful girl. I… got carried away and… well, what's the use talking, I'm not worthy of being with them… Goodbye, Ivan Petrovich!"

"He's so nice, so kind," Katya began hastily after I had again sat down next to her, "but we shall talk a lot about him later. As for now we must come to an understanding between ourselves – what do you think of the Prince?"

"Not a pleasant character by any means."

"That's what I think too. Consequently we are in agreement about that and it should be easier for us to pass judgement. Now for Natalya Nikolayevna… do you know, Ivan Petrovich, I'm still in the dark, waiting for you to be my guiding light, as it were. You have to explain things to me, because when it comes to the crux of the matter, I've only my own guesswork to go on, based on what Alyosha's told me. Apart from that, there's no one else to help me. Tell me first – this is crucial – in your opinion will Alyosha and Natasha be happy or not? I must know this before I can come to my final decision, and to be sure what to do next."

"How can one possibly tell that with any certainty?—"

"No, of course, not exactly with certainty," she interrupted me, "but what would be your best guess? Because you are very clever."

"To my mind they cannot be happy."

"Why not?"

"They're not suited to each other."

"That's what I thought!" And she folded her hands as though in deep sorrow.

"Tell me more. Listen, I really want to see Natasha badly, because I need to talk to her a lot and I think we'd be able to settle everything. In the meantime I can't help picturing her – she must be awfully clever, serious-minded, honest and wonderful to look at. That's so, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I was sure of that. Well then, if she's like that, how could she fall in love with Alyosha, who's so immature? Explain this to me – I think about it a lot."

"That cannot be explained, Katerina Fyodorovna. It's difficult to imagine what it is that makes people fall in love and why. Yes, he is a child. But do you know how strong one's love can be for a child?" My heart went out to her as I looked at her and into her eyes, which were fastened on me in serious and eager anticipation. "And the less of a child Natasha is herself," I continued, "the more mature she is, the more likely she is to fall in love with him. He is honest, sincere, terribly naive, sometimes astonishingly so. Perhaps she has fallen in love with him – how shall I put it? – as though out of pity. A virtuous heart is capable of love out of pity… Look here, I feel, I can't explain anything to you, but let me ask you a question instead – you love him, don't you?"

I came out with it boldly, and felt that the directness of my question would not confuse the boundless, artless purity of this blithe soul.

"Honestly, I still don't know," she replied softly, gazing full into my eyes, "but I think I do very much…"

"Well, there you are. And could you explain why you love him?"

"He is without guile," she replied after a brief reflection. "And when he looks straight into my eyes and says something to me at the same time, I like it very much… Listen, Ivan Petrovich, here I am talking to you about this – I a girl, and you a man – am I doing right or not?"

"Surely there's nothing wrong in that!"

"True enough. Nothing wrong, of course. And yet they," and she pointed at the group sitting round the samovar, "they'd probably have said it was wrong. Would they be right or not?"

"They'd be wrong! Let's face it, in your heart you wouldn't say you were doing anything wrong; consequently—"

"That's exactly my attitude," she interrupted, apparently anxious to cover as much ground with me as possible. "As soon as I feel uneasy about something, I immediately consult my heart, and if it is at peace, so am I. There is no other way. And I'm being completely frank with you, as if I were talking to myself, because, first, you're a wonderful person, and I know the story of you and Natasha before Alyosha came on the scene, and I cried as I listened to it."

"Really, who told you?"

"Alyosha of course, and he was in tears himself when he spoke. This was very good of him, and I admired him for it. I think he likes you more than you like him, Ivan Petrovich. That's what I love about him. Well, and secondly, I'm being so frank with you as though I were talking to myself, because you're very clever and can give me lots of advice and teach me things."

"What makes you think I'm so clever that I can teach you things?"

"Don't be like that!" She paused to think. "It's nothing – let's talk about what really matters. Help me, Ivan Petrovich – you see, I feel now I'm Natasha's rival. I know I am, so what am I to do? That's precisely why I asked you if they would be happy. I think about it day and night. Natasha's situation is awful, simply awful! You see, he's stopped loving her altogether, whereas he loves me more and more. Isn't that so?"

"I suppose it is."

"And it's not that he's deceiving her. He doesn't know himself he's falling out of love with her, but she surely does. What must she be going through!"

"So what do you want to do, Katerina Fyodorovna?"

"I've lots of plans," she replied thoughtfully, "yet I'm utterly confused. It's for this reason that I was looking forward so much for you to come and sort out everything. You know it all much better than I. You're like some kind of a god to me now. Listen, at first I argued like this: if they

love each other, they need to be happy, and therefore it's up to me to make a sacrifice and help them. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I know you have sacrificed yourself already."

"Yes, I have, and therefore when he began coming to see me and falling in love with me more and more, I started having my doubts and thinking to myself, should I sacrifice myself or not? That is very bad, isn't it?"

"It's only natural," I replied, "that's how it should be… and you're not to blame."

"I don't think so. You're only saying so because you're so kind. The way I see it is like this: my heart is not altogether pure. If it were, I'd have known what to do. But let that be! Later I got to know more about their relationship from the Prince, from Mama, from Alyosha himself, and I realized that they're not a match. You've confirmed it now. That made me think even more – what's to be done now? If they're going to be unhappy, surely it would be best for them to part, and so I decided to question you about it all thoroughly, and then go to see Natasha myself to settle the matter with her once and for all."

"To settle the matter, but how, that's the question?"

"I'll just say to her, 'You love him more than anything, therefore you should love his happiness more than anything; consequently you ought to part from him.'"

"Yes, but how do you expect her to take it? And if she agreed with you, would she have the strength to do it?"

"That's just what I've been thinking about day and night and… and…" And she suddenly burst into tears.

"You won't believe me how sorry I am for Natasha," she whispered, her lips quivering amid tears.

There was nothing to add. I looked at her in silence and was on the brink of tears myself, overcome as I was by something akin to love. What a sweet child she was! I did not inquire why she thought herself capable of constituting Alyosha's happiness.

"You do like music, don't you?" she asked, after she had calmed down a little, but still under the effect of her tears.

"I do," I replied, somewhat surprised.

"If there had been time, I'd have played you Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. I'm rehearsing it now. It has all the emotions… that I'm experiencing now. That's how it seems to me. But of that another time – now we must talk."

We began discussing how she was to see Natasha and how to arrange a meeting. She told me that she was under surveillance, and though her stepmother was kind and loved her, she would never allow her to make friends with Natalya Nikolayevna, which is why she had decided to resort to subterfuge. Of a morning she sometimes would go riding, almost invariably with the Countess. Occasionally, however, the Countess would have a headache and not accompany her, but let her go with a French lady chaperone, who happened to be ill herself at present. Therefore one only had to wait for one of the Countess's headaches to come on. In the meantime she'd talk nicely to this chaperone of hers, who is a very sweet old lady. But as a result it was just not possible to fix in advance a particular day for visiting Natasha.

"You'll get to know Natasha and there'll be no need to blame yourself," I said. "She's very anxious to get to know you herself, if only to see whom it is she's surrendering Alyosha to. Don't let it all get you down too much though. Time will see everything right, no matter what. You're going to the country, aren't you?"

"Yes, quite soon, perhaps in a month's time," she replied, "and I know the Prince insists on it."

"Do you think Alyosha will go with you?"

"I was wondering about that!" she said, looking at me intently. "I suppose he will."

"There you are."

"My God, what will come of all this – I really don't know. Listen, Ivan Petrovich, I'll write to you about everything. I'll write often and at length. You'll have no peace from me now. Are you going to come to see us often?"

"I don't know, Katerina Fyodorovna – it depends on circumstances. Perhaps I shan't come at all."

"Why is that?"

"It'll depend on various things, but mainly on my relationship with the Prince."

"I don't trust him," Katya said resolutely. "Listen, Ivan Petrovich, how about if I were to come to see you! Would that be good or not?"

"What do you think yourself?"

"I think, it would be good. I'd just pay you a visit…" she added, smiling. "I'm saying this because quite apart from respecting you, I like you very much… And I could learn from you a great deal. I like you… I ought to be ashamed for telling you all this, oughtn't I?"

"What's there to be ashamed of? You're very dear to me already, as a sister."

"You do want to be my friend?"

"Oh yes, of course!" I replied.

"Well, but they'd surely say it isn't the done thing, and a young girl ought not to behave like that," she remarked, motioning again at the group round the tea table. I will point out here that it appeared the Prince had deliberately left us alone to talk our hearts out.

"It's quite clear to me," she added, "the Prince is after my money. They think of me as a complete child, and will say as much openly to me. I don't think I am though. I'm no longer a child. They are odd – they're just like children themselves. Why are they so bothered, I wonder?"

"Katerina Fyodorovna, I forgot to ask, who are Levenka and Borenka, whom Alyosha calls on so often?"

"They're distant relations of mine. They're very clever and honest, but they do talk a lot… I know them…" and she smiled.

"Is it true you want to give them a million roubles eventually?"

"There you are, this is what I mean, they will go on about that million! I can't stand it! Of course I'd be only too glad to support any worthy cause – what would I need such a huge sum of money for, I ask you? But the point is I'm still not at all sure when I'll give it, whereas they're already sharing it out, conferring, shouting, arguing how best to spend it, even squabbling over it – which seems very odd. They're too eager. Nevertheless they're very sincere and… clever. They study. Which is better than how some other people carry on. Wouldn't you say?"

We went on talking like this for a long time yet. She told me nearly her whole life story and listened avidly to what I had to say. She insisted I speak mostly about Natasha and Alyosha. It was already twelve

o'clock when the Prince came up and informed me that it was time for us to take our leave. I said goodbye. Katya shook my hand warmly and looked at me significantly. The Countess invited me to call on them again; the Prince and I left together.

I cannot help making a strange and perhaps totally irrelevant observation. During the course of my three-hour long conversation with Katya, I came, amongst other things, to the odd but nevertheless firm conviction that in her childishness she was not even aware of the facts of life. This could not but lend an extraordinarily comic touch to some of her arguments and to the overall serious tone with which she discussed a great number of very important matters…

10

"I TELL YOU WHAT," THE PRINCE SAID, getting into the calash with me, "why don't we go and have supper, eh? What do you say?"

"I really don't know, Prince," I replied, hesitating, "I never have supper…"

"Well, we could have our *talk* over supper," he added, looking straight at me with a sly glint in his eye.

It was obvious what he was after! "He's dying to talk to me," I thought, "and that suits me down to the ground." I agreed.

"That's settled then. To Borel's on Bolshaya Morskaya."

"To a restaurant?" I asked, somewhat perplexed.

"Yes. What's wrong? I seldom have supper at home. Surely you'll accept my invitation?"

"But I told you already, I never have supper."

"Just this once won't hurt. Besides, you are my guest…"

Meaning, I'll pay for you. I was sure he added this deliberately. I allowed him to take me, but at the restaurant I decided to pay for myself. We arrived. The Prince took a private room, and with taste and discernment chose two or three dishes from the menu. They were expensive, as was the bottle of a fine table wine that he ordered. It was all more than I could afford. I looked at the menu and ordered half a hazel hen and a glass of Lafitte. The Prince protested.

"So you won't have supper with me, but this is just ridiculous! *Pardon, mon ami*,* but you're… this is fastidiousness of the worst possible kind. Shallow, overweening pride. This is inverted class snobbery, if you ask me. I don't mind telling you – I'm offended."

But I stuck to my guns.

"As you please," he added. "I'm not forcing you… tell me, Ivan Petrovich, do you think we could have a perfectly friendly discussion?"

"I'd insist on nothing less."

"Well then, stand-offishness like this will be your own undoing, as has already been the case with all those of your ilk. You're a man of letters, you need to know the world, and yet you shy away from everything. I'm not talking of hazel hens now, but you seem bent on cutting all ties with our circle, which augurs nothing good. Quite apart from the fact that you stand to lose a great deal – well, in a word, damage your career prospects – you really ought to know at first hand what it is you're writing about in your novels, which feature dukes and princes and boudoirs… it's my world, damnit! But all you care to go on about is destitution, lost overcoats, government inspectors, hot-tempered army officers, clerks, tales of yesteryear and religious dissent – I know it all too well?"

"But you're mistaken, Prince. If I don't move in your so-called 'high society', it's because firstly, it bores me, and secondly, because there's nothing it can offer me! As a matter of fact, however, I do go to…"

"I know, to Prince R.'s, once in a blue moon. To be sure, that's where I met you. But for the rest of the time you and your lot simply puff yourselves up with democratic pride as you languish in your garrets, though this doesn't apply to all of your ilk of course. Still, one does come across the odd hothead who'd turn even my stomach…"

"I would beg you, Prince, to change the subject and not concern yourself with us and our garrets."

"Dear me, how sensitive you are! But then you did give me leave to speak with you as a friend. I beg your pardon though, I've done nothing yet to deserve your friendship. The wine's not bad. Try some."

He poured me half a glass from his bottle.

"You see, my dear Ivan Petrovich, I'm fully aware that it's not the done thing to foist one's friendship upon anyone. After all, we're not all as uncouth and arrogant towards you as you like to portray us. Besides, I understand perfectly well too it's not out of predilection for me that you're sitting here now, rather because I promised to have a *talk* with you. Is that not so?"

He burst out laughing.

"And since you're looking after the interests of a certain person, you're eager to hear what I have to say. Am I right?" he added with a sinister smile.

"You are quite right," I interrupted brusquely. I could see he was one of those who, on seeing someone the least bit under his influence, would immediately take advantage of the fact. I certainly was under his influence; I could not leave without hearing all he intended to say, and he knew that very well. His tone of voice suddenly changed, inclining more and more towards the arrogantly familiar and taunting. "You're quite right, Prince. That's precisely why I came, otherwise, take my word for it, I wouldn't have agreed to sit here… at this hour."

I would have liked to say "otherwise I'd never have agreed to come with you in the first place", but I did not, and said something else, not out of fear, but out of that confounded weakness and reserve of mine. Indeed, how could one be offensive to someone's face, even though that person deserved it and I was bent on offending him! I fancied the Prince noticed this by the look in my eyes and he regarded me with derision, as though delighting in my faint-heartedness and challenging me with his gaze: "There now, you lost your nerve, you flinched – never mind, old chap!" This was surely the case, because after I finished, he roared with laughter and patted me on the knee with a kind of patronizing bonhomie.

"You do make me laugh, young fellow," I read in his eyes. "Steady on!" I thought to myself.

"I'm in a very good mood today!" he exclaimed, "and I'm damned if I know why. Yes, yes, my friend, yes! That's just the person I wanted to talk about. After all, we need to bring things out into the open, come to some kind of an *understanding*, and I hope that this time you'll see my point entirely. Back then I started talking to you about the money and that old duffer of a father, that senile innocent… Well, who cares now! I wasn't serious, really! Hahaha, let's face it, you're a writer, you should have guessed…"

I watched him with consternation. I didn't think he was quite drunk yet.

"Well, as for that girl, frankly, I respect her, I even like her, I assure you. She's a bit capricious but 'what rose is without thorns?' as they used to say in the olden days, and they were right – thorns are prickly, but that's the attraction, and though my Alexei is a fool, I've already forgiven him in part – for his good taste. To cut a long story, I find these girls attractive, and I even have," he pursed his lips with deliberation, "certain plans up my sleeve… But of that later—"

"Prince! Please listen to me!" I exclaimed. "I don't understand this sudden transformation in you, but… let's change the subject, if you don't mind!"

"You're getting excited again! Well… fine, fine! I just want to ask you this, my good friend – do you respect her a lot?"

"That goes without saying," I replied with unconcealed impatience.

"And, well, you love her too, don't you?" he continued, baring his teeth loathsomely and screwing up his eyes.

"You're forgetting yourself!" I exclaimed.

"There, there! Calm down! I'm in a most amazing humour tonight. I've never felt so cheerful for ages. Let's have some champagne! What say you, my poet?"

"I shan't drink any, I don't feel like it!"

"I won't have it! You must definitely be my guest tonight. I feel on top of the world, and since I'm good-natured to the point of sentimentality, I can't be happy on my own. Who knows, we may yet end up drinking to eternal friendship, hahaha! Yes, my young friend, you still don't know me! I'm certain you'll grow to like me. I want you to share my sorrow and happiness with me tonight, my joy and my tears, though I hope I won't shed any. Well, how about it, Ivan Petrovich? You must realize above all that if things don't turn out the way I want them to, all my goodwill shall pass, vanish, dissipate, and you'll not learn anything, whereas you came here solely in order to find out something. Tell me if I'm not right!" he added, winking at me brazenly again. "Well, the choice is yours."

The threat was real. I agreed. "He's not trying to get me drunk by any chance, is he?" I thought to myself. Incidentally, it might be appropriate at this stage to mention a certain rumour about the Prince that had reached me some time ago. It was said that – correct and well got up

though he always was in public – in private, of a night-time, he was wont to get blind drunk and secretly indulge in obscene debauchery, in clandestine, unspeakable debauchery… I had heard terrible rumours about him… People said Alyosha was aware that his father used to drink heavily at times, and that he tried to conceal it from everyone, especially Natasha. Once he nearly let the cat out of the bag in my presence, but dropped the subject immediately and would not respond to any of my questions. In fairness, it was not from him that I originally learnt about it, and I confess I refused to believe it at first; now I just waited to see what would happen next.

Wine was served; the Prince filled two glasses, one for himself and one for me.

"Sweet, precious girl, never mind the ticking off she gave me!" he continued, savouring the wine with relish. "But it's precisely at moments like that that these sweet things come into their own… And she probably thought she'd shown me up that night, you remember, that she'd made mincemeat of me! Hahaha! And how that blush becomes her! Are you a connoisseur of women? Sometimes a sudden blush goes well on a pale cheek, have you noticed? Good Heavens! You're not getting angry with me again, are you?"

"Yes, I am!" I exclaimed, no longer restraining myself. "And I don't want you to talk about Natalya Nikolayevna now… not in that kind of tone anyway. I… I shan't let you!"

"Tut-tut! Well, as you wish, anything to please you, I'll change the subject. I'm compliant and soft as putty, you know. Let's talk about you. I like you, Ivan Petrovich, if only you knew how dearly, how sincerely concerned I am for you—"

"Prince, wouldn't it be better to talk business?" I interrupted him.

"You mean, about *our business*. I can read you like a book, *mon ami*, and you won't even suspect how close we'll come to talking business once we start talking about you, provided of course you don't interrupt me. And so, to continue – what I wanted to say to you, my priceless Ivan Petrovich, is that to live like you do is simply to bury yourself alive. I hope you will allow me to touch upon this rather delicate matter – in all friendship. You are poor, you borrow money from your publishers, you settle your miserable little debts, and for the next six months you

survive on nothing but tea as you shiver in your garret, hoping to get that novel of yours published in instalments. Tell me if I'm wrong."

"What of it, but still it's—"

"More honourable than stealing, bowing and scraping, taking bribes, stabbing people in the back and so on and so forth. I know, I know exactly what you want to say. All this is as old as the hills."

"And consequently there is no need to talk about my affairs. Do I really have to teach you manners, Prince?"

"No, not you, of course. But what are we to do if it's precisely this delicate matter we're touching upon, and there's no avoiding it? Still, let's not go on about garrets. I've no particular interest in them myself, except in certain cases," and with that he chuckled coarsely. "But the thing that puzzles me is, what attraction is there for you in playing second fiddle? True enough, one of your writers,* I seem to remember, said somewhere that perhaps man's greatest accomplishment is when he can find it in him to settle for the second-best in life… or something to that effect anyway. I heard it mentioned somewhere… but the fact remains, however, Alyosha has stolen your bride-to-be, that much I do know, and like some kind of a Schiller you now torment yourself on the lovers' behalf, and offer them your assistance almost to the point of being their errand boy… I'm very sorry, my dear chap, but this really is a rather nauseating travesty of magnanimity… It's a wonder you don't get tired of the whole thing, honestly! The indignity of it. If I were in your shoes, I think I'd have died of misery, but it's the humiliation, the sheer ignominy of it all!"

"Prince! I think you brought me here deliberately to insult me!" I exclaimed beside myself with rage.

"Not at all, my friend, no, at this point in time I'm simply being practical and am only concerned with your happiness. In a word I want to see the whole matter settled. But let's put *the whole business* aside for a moment and – if you'd only hear me out to the end and try not to get excited – a couple of minutes is all I ask. Look here, what if you were to get married? You notice, this is a complete *digression* on my part – so why are you staring at me with such surprise?"

"I'm waiting for you to finish," I replied, indeed staring at him in astonishment.

"There's really nothing more to be said. What I'd really like to know is what would you say if one of your friends, who wished you lasting, genuine happiness, as opposed to the ephemeral kind, were to offer you a girl – young, pretty but… who'd already been there before. I'm speaking figuratively, but you know what I mean, well, someone after the likeness of Natalya Fyodorovna, with a generous reward thrown in of course… (You will notice, I'm digressing again rather than talking about *our business*.) So, what would you say?"

"I'd say you were… mad."

"Hahaha! Goodness! I can see you're on the point of striking me!"

I really was ready to attack him. I was at the end of my tether. He seemed to me like some kind of a snake or a huge spider that I'd have liked to crush. He enjoyed ridiculing me; he played cat and mouse with me, believing me to be completely in his power. It seemed to me (and I was sure of this) that he derived some kind of enjoyment, even some kind of wanton pleasure, in his self-abasement and in the insolence, the cynicism with which he tore off his mask in front of me. He wanted to relish my surprise and my horror. He genuinely detested me and was mocking me to my face.

I had a feeling from the start that all this was stage-managed and that he had an ulterior motive, but my position was such that, come what may, I had to hear him out. It was in Natasha's interests, and I had to endure and brave everything, because at that instant perhaps everything hung in the balance. But how could one listen to those cynical, outrageous references to her, how could one keep one's temper? To make matters worse, he understood only too well that I had to listen to him, and this merely exacerbated the indignity. "Come to think of it, he needs me just as much," I thought and began to reply gruffly and defiantly. He caught on immediately.

"Look here, my young friend," he began, looking at me gravely, "we two cannot continue like this, therefore let's come to an agreement. You see, I intend to communicate something to you, and you ought to be kind enough to agree to listen to whatever I have to say. I wish to speak as I want and as I please, which is only proper under the circumstances. So, how shall it be then, my young friend, will you be obliging enough?"

I bit my lip and said nothing, and this despite the fact that he regarded me with such caustic scorn as though he himself were challenging me to the most vigorous protest. But he sensed that I had already decided to stay, and went on, "Don't be angry with me, my friend. What is it, in fact, you object to? You've mistaken the manner for the substance, isn't that right? Let's be quite frank, you expected nothing different of me, no matter what tone I'd have adopted with you – consequently the end effect would have been the same whether I'd been unctuously polite or like now. You detest me, don't you? You see how guileless, sincere and full of bonhomie I am? I conceal nothing from you, not even my facetious mannerisms. Yes, *mon cher*,* yes, would that there were more bonhomie from your side, the two of us would get on famously, come to terms completely and in the end understand each other perfectly. And don't be surprised at me – in truth I'm so fed up with all this naivety, this mock sentimentality that Alyosha affects, all this Schillerian romanticism, this rhetoric in this damned relationship with this Natasha (sweet little girl that she is when all's said and done), that I, so to speak, can't but welcome an opportunity to cock a snook at it all. Well, here's my opportunity. Besides, I always wanted to pour my heart out to you. Hahaha!"

"You surprise me, Prince, and I can hardly recognize you. A veritable Pulcinella* judging by your tone of voice – all these unexpected revelations…"

"Hahaha, that's quite true in a way! What a cute comparison! Hahaha! Such *fun*, my friend, such excellent *fun* I'm having, I'm on top of the world, well, and as for you, my poet, you ought to show me every kind of consideration. But better still, let's just drink and be merry," he concluded, well pleased with himself and topping up his glass. "Look here, my friend, just that silly evening, you remember, at Natasha's, was really the end. True, she herself was very nice about it, but I left the place in a foul mood and won't forget it in a hurry. Neither forget nor brush it under the carpet. Of course, our time will come too, and in fact it's fast approaching, but let's leave that be for now. Incidentally, I wanted to explain to you there's a trait in my character which you've not spotted as yet – a hatred of all this banal, utterly pointless show of innocence and sentimentality, one of my most sporting amusements

being to pretend I am that way inclined myself and, as I enter into the spirit of it, to befriend and string along some everlastingly juvenile Schiller, only suddenly and unexpectedly to give him the shock of his life – lift up my mask, pull a face, poke my tongue out at him just at the moment when he's least expecting it. What was that? You can't see the point of it, you think it's disgusting, outrageous, uncouth perhaps, is that so?"

"Pretty much."

"You're honest. But I can't help it if these people get on my nerves! It's silly, but I too am being honest – such is my nature. Still, I'd like to tell you one or two details of my life. It'll help you to get to know me all the better, which will only add to the fun. Yes, come to think of it, I really am a bit of a Pulcinella tonight. Pulcinella's an honest sort, isn't he?"

"Listen, Prince, it's getting late, and, really—"

"What? Goodness, you're so impatient! And what's the hurry? I say, no need to rush, let's have a friendly open chat, you know, over a glass of wine, like the best of pals. You think I'm drunk? Never mind, it's better that way. Hahaha! To be sure, these friendly get-togethers are always so unforgettable, they bring back such fond memories. You're not a good person, Ivan Petrovich. There's no sentimentality in you, no warmth. Why should you begrudge the odd hour with such a pal as me? Besides, all this is also germane to our business… I'd have thought that was obvious! And you call yourself a writer! You ought to be grateful for the opportunity. You could model one of your characters on me, you know, hahaha! Goodness, how disarmingly sincere I am tonight!"

He was getting noticeably drunk. His face changed and took on an angry cast. He was obviously raring to wound, hurt, snap, ridicule. "In a way it's better he's drunk," I thought to myself, "that way he's bound to blurt out more." But he was on his guard.

"My friend," he began, evidently full of himself, "I just made an admission to you, perhaps not an altogether appropriate one, that I'm sometimes possessed by an indomitable urge to poke my tongue out at someone in certain circumstances. As a result of this naive and simple-hearted disclosure you compared me to Pulcinella, which amused me mightily. But if you disapprove of me or are astonished that I'm uncivil towards you now, or even gross like a peasant – in a word, that I've

suddenly changed my attitude towards you – you are in that case completely unfair. First, that's how I want to play it, and secondly I'm not at home, I'm *with you*... what I want to say is that we're now *having a party* like good pals, and thirdly that I'm full of quirks. You know, I once was even quirky enough to fancy myself a metaphysician and philanthropist, and dabbled in ideas that were nearly as way out as yours! To be sure, that was in the dim and distant past, in the golden days of my youth. I recall the time when, full of the milk of human kindness, I visited my estate in the country and, it goes without saying, was bored to death, and you'll hardly believe what happened to me then! Out of sheer boredom I started keeping an eye out for some pretty girls... Look, no need to pull faces! Oh my young friend! Can't you see what a friendly setting we're now in? What better time to have fun, let one's hair down! I'm a Russian through and through, you know, a genuine Russian, a patriot, I like to let my hair down, and besides one must seize the opportunity and enjoy life. Death will come and that'll be that! And so, I sowed my wild oats. I remember this shepherd girl and her husband, a handsome peasant lad he was. I was pretty hard on him. Had a good mind to send him into the army (past misdemeanours, my poet!), but he never made it into the army. He died in my hospital... You know I used to run a hospital in the village, twelve beds – every convenience, all spick and span, parquet floors. But I pulled it down ages ago, whereas at the time I was well and truly proud of it – the philanthropist in me. As for the peasant lad, I well nigh beat the life out of him because of his wife... Look, why are you pulling those faces again? Have I said something disgusting? Your finer feelings have been offended? There, there, calm yourself! It's all in the past now. That was my romantic phase, when I was full of good causes, wanted to found a philanthropic society... it was all the rage of the time! That's when I let the whip do the talking. But not anymore. Now I'm reduced to pulling faces – now we've all been reduced to just pulling faces – the world has moved on... But it's that fool Ikhmenev who really makes me laugh more than anything now. I'm sure he knew only too well that episode with the peasant lad... ay, and here's the rub! Weak as dishwater, overflowing with kindness, he fell in love with the image of me that he had created himself and decided to turn a blind eye to the

lot, which he duly did. In other words, he refused to believe facts staring him in the face, and for the next twelve years supported me to the hilt against all odds until he found himself on the receiving end. Hahaha! But it's all a load of nonsense anyway! Let's drink, my young friend. Listen – do you like women?"

I did not answer. I only listened. He had already started on his second bottle.

"But I like talking about them over supper. Why don't I introduce you after supper to one Mlle Phileberte – eh? What do you think? Goodness, what's wrong with you? You don't even want to look at me… hm!"

He paused to think. But suddenly he raised his head, looked at me with some kind of a meaningful intensity and continued.

"You know, my poet, I want to let you in on one of nature's secrets, which has probably escaped you altogether so far. I'm convinced that at this moment you look upon me as a sinner, perhaps even a scoundrel, a monster of depravity and vice. But this is what I'll tell you! If only it could come about (which, following the laws of human nature it never can, of course), if it could come about that each one of us were to describe his innermost secrets – secrets which one would hesitate and fear to tell not only to people at large, but even to one's closest friends, nay, fear to admit even to one's own self – the world would be filled with such a stench that each one of us would choke to death. That's why, speaking in parenthesis, all our social conventions and niceties are so beneficial. There is much profound wisdom in them, I won't say moral, but simply cautionary, comforting, which of course is all for the better, because in essence morality is comfort – that is, it has been devised solely for comfort. But of niceties later, I'm getting confused now, remind me of them later. I shall conclude as follows, however: you accuse me of vice, debauchery, immorality, whereas my only fault now perhaps is that I'm *more honest* than others, and nothing else; that I don't cover up what others conceal even from themselves, as I already said previously… It's wrong of me, but that's my choice. To be sure though, don't worry," he added with a derisive smile, "I said 'wrong', but it's not as if I were asking for pardon. One other thing you must note: I'm not out to embarrass you, I'm not enquiring if you have similar secrets of your own, that I may use them in order to justify

myself… I'm behaving properly and like a gentleman. As a matter of fact I always behave like a gentleman…"

"You simply talk too much," I said, looking at him with contempt.

"Talk too much, hahaha! And shall I tell you what you're thinking about now? You're thinking – why has he brought me here and suddenly, without any rhyme or reason, started to unbutton himself? Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'll find that out later."

"More likely you've had nearly two bottles and… it's gone to your head."

"You mean simply drunk. And it may well be so. 'Gone to your head!' – not quite as crude as drunk. My word, the very soul of discretion! But… we're in danger of falling out again after touching upon such an interesting topic. Yes, my poet, if there's anything sweet and charming left in this world, it has to be women."

"You know, Prince, I still can't understand why you've decided to choose me in particular as the confidant of your secrets and… sexual propensities."

"Hm… as I told you, all in good time. Don't worry. But even if for no reason except sport. You're a poet, you're bound to understand me, something I already pointed out to you anyway. There's a peculiar gratification to be derived from the sudden tearing-down of a mask, from the cynicism of not even deigning to betray any sense of shame in suddenly exposing oneself to another indecently. I'll tell you a story. There used to be a mentally sick clerk in Paris – he was confined to an asylum after he was finally pronounced unbalanced. Well then, during his bouts of madness this is how he used to amuse himself: he'd undress at home, stark-naked as the day he was born, down to his shoes, throw a large, ankle-length cloak over his shoulders, wrap himself in it and, affecting a grand and self-important air, step out into the street. To look at he was just like anyone else, a man in a large cloak strolling for his pleasure. But no sooner would he see some lone passer-by ahead with no one else about than he'd walk straight towards him, with the most serious and profound expression on his face, stop in front of him suddenly, fling his cloak open and expose himself in all his… glory.

He'd stand for about a minute in silence, then cover himself up again and, keeping a straight face and with perfect composure, glide past the thunderstruck observer regally, like the ghost in *Hamlet*. He'd do that to everybody – men, women, children – and that's all he needed to keep him happy. It's precisely some of this thrill that one can experience in suddenly knocking some kind of a jumped-up Schiller into the middle of next week by poking one's tongue out at him when he's least expecting it. 'Knocking someone into the middle of next week' – a fine expression, I like it. I'm not sure if I didn't come across it in a recent something one of you lot wrote."

"Well, he was mad, whereas…"

"I'm sane?"

"Yes."

The Prince roared with laughter.

"You are perfectly right, my dear chap," he added with the most overbearing expression on his face.

"Prince," I said, ruffled by his impudence, "you hate me, as you hate the lot of us, and now you're using me to avenge yourself on all and sundry. And all this because of your paltry self-esteem. You're evil and petty with it. We put your nose out of joint, and you just cannot live down what happened that night. Of course nothing could be calculated to get your own back better than the utter contempt you're holding me in. You've even absolved yourself from the normal and universally binding respect that we all owe one another. You're clearly out to demonstrate that you don't even wish to show me the courtesy of being embarrassed in appearing before me in your true colours, as you pull down your mask with such indecent haste and expose yourself with such blatant moral cynicism—"

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked, regarding me with an angry, arrogant gaze. "To demonstrate how principled you are?"

"To demonstrate that I know what you are about and that you should be under no illusions."

"*Quelle idée, mon cher*," he continued, suddenly reverting to his former tone of good-natured badinage. "You only made me change the subject. *Buvons, mon ami*,* let me fill your glass. And I was just about to tell you a marvellous and extraordinarily fascinating story. I'll be

brief. There was a lady friend I used to know once – no longer in her first flush of youth but about twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Stunningly beautiful, what a bust, what a figure, the way she walked! Her gaze was fierce, hawklike, always stern and severe – her manner haughty and aloof. She had a reputation for being frigid as an iceberg, and she overawed everybody by her unassailable, her daunting virtue. Daunting is the word. No one in her circle was more intolerant than she. She condemned not only vice, but every kind of weakness, however trivial, in other women, and she judged them outright, without mercy. Within her own circle she wielded enormous influence. Some of the most distinguished and officiously charitable old ladies deferred to her, and even fawned on her. She regarded everybody with the dispassionate austerity of an abbess in a medieval nunnery. The younger women trembled at the very sight of her, not to say her censure. Just one word, one hint of an adverse comment from her could ruin a reputation – such was her standing in society. Even men were afraid of her. Finally, she began to indulge in some kind of contemplative mysticism, to be sure, all so serene and exalted… And, guess what? There was no harlot who was more debauched than she, and I had the good fortune of fully earning her trust. In a word, I was her secret and mysterious paramour. Our meetings were organized so skilfully, so expertly arranged, that even no one in the house had the slightest inkling of what was going on. Only one of her younger chambermaids, a French girl and a delectable morsel herself, was privy to all her secrets, but she was the very soul of discretion – she herself participated in all the goings-on. How? That I shall omit for now. My lady was so lascivious that even the Marquis de Sade himself could have learnt a thing or two from her. But the strongest, the most exciting and thrilling aspect of this sport was its air of mystery and the sheer effrontery of the deception. This mockery of everything that the Countess preached in society as being elevated, sublime and inviolate, no less than her inner satanic laughter and premeditated flouting of everything that ought not to be flouted – all this without restraint, taken to its utmost limit, beyond the reaches of even the wildest imagination – was that which constituted the principal and most vivid feature of the gratification. Yes, she was the very she-devil incarnate, but an irresistibly enchanting one. Even now I cannot

recall her without paroxysms of delight. In the midst of the most passionate pleasures she would suddenly burst out laughing as one possessed, and I understood, I well understood that laughter, and I would join in with her… Even now the very memory of it makes me catch my breath, though it was many moons ago. A year later she dropped me for someone else. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't have harmed her. Who on earth would have believed me? Such a woman! Well, what do you say to that, my young friend?"

"How disgusting!" I replied, having heard out his admission with repugnance.

"You wouldn't have been the young friend that you are had you replied differently! I knew you'd say that. Hahaha! Wait, *mon ami*, time will come and you'll see what's what; as for now you have need of less strong meat. No, you're no poet after all – this woman knew what life was all about and she knew how to make the most of it."

"But why go to such lengths of bestiality?"

"What bestiality?"

"Such as this woman reached, and you with her."

"Ah, you call that bestiality – a sure sign you're still a mere babe, a tiro. Of course, I admit, independence can assume radically different… but, let us keep things in perspective, *mon ami…* you must agree, this is all nonsense."

"What is?"

"Everything except one's personality, one's own self. All's for the taking, and the world's my oyster. Listen, my friend, I still believe one can have a good time in this world. And that's the best thing to believe in, because otherwise one couldn't even have a bad time – there'd be nothing left but to poison oneself. They say one fool did precisely that. He got so carried away in his philosophizing that he renounced everything, the lot, even the legitimacy of all normal and natural human obligations, with the end result that he was left with nothing, an absolute zero, which is why he declared that the best thing in life was a dose of prussic acid. You will tell me this reeks of Hamlet, of noble despair, in short – of something sublime that's way beyond us. But you're a poet, whereas I'm a simple man and will therefore say that things must be looked at from the simplest, the most practical vantage

point. For instance I've already long ago liberated myself from all ties and even obligations. I'd entertain obligations only if I should stand to benefit from them in some way. Naturally, you cannot regard things quite like that – your feet are shackled and your taste is impaired. You yearn for lofty ideals and virtue. But, my friend, I'm ready to go along with anything you wish, but what can I do if I know for certain that behind every human virtue lurks profound selfishness? And the more virtuous the undertaking, the more selfishness there is in it. Love thy own self – that's one rule I recognize. Life's just a business transaction. Don't throw your money about needlessly, but pay your way if you wish, and you'll fulfil all your obligations towards your fellow man. So much for my morality, if that's what you're after, though frankly, it'd be better not to pay your fellow man, but see if you couldn't induce him to do you favours for free. Ideals I have none and have no wish to have any, never having missed them anyway. One can survive in this world so comfortably, so nicely without them… and *en somme*,* I'm very glad I can manage without prussic acid. You see, had I been just a little more virtuous, I very likely wouldn't have managed, like that fool of a philosopher (a German, no doubt). Yes, indeed, life's still got lots to offer! I love influence, honours, good hotels, a huge stake at cards (I adore cards). But the main, the most important thing is women… women in all their shapes and forms. I even go for debauchery that's covert, secretive, and the more eccentric and depraved the better, even with a whiff of sordidness for extra delectation… Hahaha! You should see your face! If looks could kill!"

"If—" I replied.

"Well, let's assume you're right too, but deviant sex is still better than prussic acid. Wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"I deliberately asked you, 'Wouldn't you say?' to savour your reply. I knew what it would be in advance. No, my friend, if you're a real philanthropist, you'd recommend to any sensible person exactly the same kind of delectation I enjoy, even down to the filthy bits, otherwise anyone who's got his head screwed on would soon find there's nothing for him in this paradise for fools. Your fools would be over the moon though! As the saying goes – life's a thing that none but fools would

keep. And if you want to know, nothing's better than to live amongst fools and curry their favour. It makes eminent sense! Don't be surprised that I value prejudice, observe certain conventions, seek power – it's because I know I live in an empty society. But it offers me creature comforts and I'm only too happy to support it, to make out I'm championing its cause, whereas if it came to it I'd be the first to turn my back on it. Rest assured I'm familiar with all your newfangled ideas, even though I've never suffered from them or had much regard for them. Never had any pangs of conscience either. I'm ready to go along with anything provided it suits my book – our name is legion and life really treats us well. Everything in the world may go to pot, but you can be sure we shall survive. We have been around since the beginning of time. The whole world may go under, but we are sure to surface. Incidentally, you only need to look around to see how resilient people like us are. Let's face it, we are singularly, phenomenally tough. Has that ever occurred to you? Ergo, nature itself has been kind to us, hahaha! I definitely want to live till ninety. I don't like death and it frightens me. Hell knows how one may come to die! But why talk about it! It's that suicidal philosopher who's got me going. To hell with philosophy! *Buvons, mon cher!* I say, we were going to talk about pretty girls, weren't we?… Where are you off to?"

"I'm going, and it's time you too—"

"Come, come, I bared my soul to you, and you're unwilling to acknowledge what a splendid act of friendship that was. Hahaha! You haven't got the milk of human kindness in you, my poet. But wait, I want another bottle."

"A third one?"

"Yes, a third one. Apropos virtue, my young nursling – you don't mind if I call you by this sweet name? Who knows, my words of wisdom may yet bear fruit – and so, my nursling, I've already talked of virtue, well – the more the virtue, the more the selfishness. I want to tell you a pretty little story on the subject. I once loved a girl with what amounted to almost genuine love. She even went to some lengths to sacrifice herself for me…"

"Is that the one you fleeced?" I asked bluntly, casting aside all restraint.

The Prince started, his face dropped as he stared back at me, his inflamed eyes glinting in consternation and fury.

"Just a minute," he said as though talking to himself, "just a minute, don't rush me. The drink's really gone to my head, let me get my thoughts together…"

He paused and stared at me with the same malevolent gaze, resting one hand on mine as though for fear of my leaving. I am certain that at that instant he was trying to work out how could I possibly have known about the matter, which was a closely guarded secret, and whether he mightn't be compromised by it. This lasted about a minute, but suddenly his face changed – the previous, merrily inebriated, derisive expression returned to his eyes, and he burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! My word, Talleyrand* would have been proud of you! I must confess, I really felt egg on my face when she blurted out that I stole from her! How she screeched, how she swore! A demented woman if ever there was one, and… with no self-restraint either. But judge for yourself – first, I never fleeced her, as you suggested just now. She personally gave me her money as a gift, and so it was by rights mine. Let's put it this way, supposing you gave me your best tailcoat as a present," saying this he shot a glance at my ill-fitting one that the tailor Ivan Skornyagin had run up for me some three years previously, but which was the only one I had. "I'm duly grateful to you, I carry on wearing it, suddenly a year later you have a quarrel with me and want it back, but I've already worn it out. This is unfair – why give it in the first place? Secondly, in spite of the fact that the money was mine, I would have returned it without fail but, have a heart, where was I to rustle up such a sum in a hurry? However, the main thing is, I can't abide all this sentimentality and the Schiller-type nonsense, you already heard me mention – that's what started it all off in fact. You won't believe me when I tell you what an act she put on for my benefit, shouting that I could keep the money (my money, mind). That's when I really went mad, and suddenly I was able to see things in their true colours, because my presence of mind is something that never deserts me. I thought to myself, if I gave her the money, I might even make her unhappy. I'd have deprived her of the pleasure of being totally miserable *on my account* and of cursing me for it for the rest of her life.

Believe you me, my friend, there is supreme pleasure to be derived from the kind of misery where one knows oneself to be quite blameless and generous and totally justified in calling the wrongdoer a scoundrel. One comes across this ecstasy of hatred precisely in your Schillerian types, that goes without saying. She probably went hungry later, but I'm sure she was happy. I didn't want to deprive her of this happiness and that's exactly why I didn't send her the money. Hence the complete justification of my rule of thumb, namely the more pronounced and vociferous one's magnanimity, the more riddled it is with the worst kind of selfishness… Do you really not see it? But… you wanted to pick a bone with me, hahaha!… Well, let's have the truth, you did, didn't you?… You Talleyrand, you!"

"Goodbye!" I said, getting up.

"Not just yet! Two more words before you go," he exclaimed, changing his tone from mocking to serious. "Listen to my final say on the matter. Of all that I said it follows as day follows night – you couldn't have failed to notice it yourself – that I never, but never, miss a favourable chance. I love money, and I'm in need of it. Katerina Fyodorovna has lots. Her father was ten years in the wine trade. She has now three million roubles, and this three million will come in very handy to me. Alyosha and Katya are a perfect match – both are as stupid as they come, which is all I need. Hence I'm determined that their marriage take place, and the sooner the better. In two or three weeks Katya and the Countess will be going to the country. Alyosha must accompany them. Be sure to warn Natalya Nikolayevna that there's to be no sentimentality or any Schiller-inspired nonsense, no opposition to me. I'm vindictive and dangerous, and shall stand up for my interests. I'm not afraid of her. Everything will unquestionably be done my way, and therefore, even if it's you I'm warning now, it's with her in mind really. So see to it that she doesn't do anything foolish and behaves sensibly. Otherwise she'll be very sorry, very sorry indeed. Come to that, she ought to be grateful to me I haven't dealt with her according to her deserts and the full rigours of the law. You will be aware, my poet, that the law protects family values, it guarantees a son's obedience to his father and that those who entice children away from their sacred obligations to their parents fall foul of the law. Remember, finally, I

have connections and she has none, and… do you really not understand what I could have done with her?… But I haven't, because so far she has behaved sensibly. Don't worry, every minute their every movement these past six months has been under close surveillance, and I've been kept informed of everything down to the last detail. That's why I chose to bide my time until Alyosha would reject her himself, which is already happening. In the meantime the lad might as well have his fling. Be that as it may, in his eyes I've remained a caring father, and it's important for me he should think of me that way. Hahaha! When I recall that I nearly complimented her that night for being so generous and unselfish in not marrying him! I really would have liked to see her try! As regards my visit to her then, it was simply time that an end was put to their relationship. But I needed to be reassured with my own eyes, to experience it all at first hand… Well, I think you've had enough! Or perhaps you'd like to hear some more reasons why I brought you here, why I've been playacting in front of you and been so impossibly frank, whereas it could all have been stated without any avowals of frankness – yes?"

"Yes." I gritted my teeth and listened avidly. I had nothing more to say to him.

"It was for one reason only, my friend – because I detected in you a little more common sense and clarity of vision to see things in their true colours than in either of our two little fools. You'd have known sooner or later who I am, you'd have guessed, formed an opinion of me, but I wanted to save you all the effort and decided to demonstrate clearly who exactly it was you were dealing with. First-hand impressions count for everything. Try to understand me, mon ami. You know whom you're dealing with, you love her, and therefore I now hope you will exercise all your influence – let's face it, you do have influence over her – to save her from certain kinds of trouble. Else there will be trouble and, I assure you in all sincerity, by no means inconsiderable trouble. Well, finally, the third reason for my frankness with you (I can see you've already guessed it, my dear friend), yes, I really wanted to spit on the whole of this sorry business and, spit… especially before your very eyes…"

"And you have succeeded," I said, shaking with agitation. "I fully agree, nothing could have better conveyed your hatred and contempt for me and all I stand for as this so-called frankness of yours. You not only didn't care if it compromised you in *my* eyes, but you didn't even betray any sense of shame before me… You really gave a good impression of the madman in his cloak. You treated me as something less than human."

"You've hit the nail on the head, my young friend," he said, getting up, "right on the head – you're not an author for nothing. I hope we'll part amicably though. I don't suppose we'll be drinking to eternal friendship, however, will we?"

"You're drunk, and that's the only thing that stops me giving you the response you deserve…"

"Another figure of speechlessness – you stopped short, so I'll never know how you would have responded, hahaha! I don't suppose you'd let me pay for you either?"

"Don't worry, I'll pay my own share."

"I'm sure you will. Nor would we be going the same way?"

"I'm not going your way."

"Farewell, my poet. I hope you have understood me…"

He left without looking at me, his gait slightly unsteady. A footman helped him into his calash. I went my own way. It was gone two o'clock in the morning and raining. The night was dark…

Part Four

1

I SHALL NOT DESCRIBE MY ANGER. In spite of the fact that I ought to have been prepared for everything, I was astonished, as though he had appeared before me quite unexpectedly in all his vileness. As I remember, my feelings were disordered, as though something were weighing down upon me to the point of depression; I felt smitten, and sullen anxiety gnawed more and more at my heart; I was afraid for Natasha. I foresaw much suffering ahead for her and I vaguely tried to think how to avoid it, how best to lighten the last remaining days before the final dénouement. It was approaching fast, and how could one fail to predict its nature!

I hardly remember how I reached home, even though I was getting soaked by the rain all the way. It was about three o'clock in the morning. I had scarcely knocked on the front door when I heard a groan, and the door was hurriedly unlocked as though Nelly had never gone to bed but had been waiting up for me on the very doorstep. The candle was burning. I looked into her face and gasped. It was completely transformed – her eyes shone as in fever, and there was something wild in her gaze as though she did not recognize me. She was running a high temperature.

"Nelly, what's the matter with you, are you ill?" I asked, bending over her and putting my arm around her.

She pressed up close to me, trembling, as if afraid of something and began to speak quickly, haltingly, as if dying to tell me something urgent. But her words were incoherent and strange. I could make no sense of what she was saying. She was raving.

I led her quickly over to the bed. But she kept pressing against me convulsively as though terrified, as though seeking protection from someone, and even after she was already in bed, she still snatched at my hand and clutched it tightly, fearing that I might leave her again. I was so shaken, upset and on edge that, looking at her, I even started crying. I myself was ill. On seeing my tears, she looked long and hard at me with intense, concentrated attention, as though trying to fathom and work something out. It was clear this cost her a lot of effort. At last there was something like a glimmer of consciousness in her face; after a severe attack of epilepsy she was usually unable to muster her thoughts for some time and articulate her words clearly. And so it was now. After making a supreme effort to say something and realizing that I was unable to comprehend her, she put out her hand and started wiping my tears, then she clasped her arms round my neck, pulled me towards her and kissed me.

Now it was clear – in my absence she had suffered a fit and it had come at the precise instant when she was standing at the door. Having regained consciousness, it probably took her quite some time finally to recover her faculties. On such occasions reality and delirium tend to merge, and she probably imagined something outlandish and frightening. At the same time she was vaguely aware that I was due back and would be knocking at the door, and so lying on the floor immediately by the door, she was listening out for me, and had struggled to her feet at my first knock.

"But why should she have been right by the door?" I thought to myself, and suddenly noticed with surprise that she was wearing her fur coat (I'd just bought one for her from an old pedlar woman I knew who had called on me at my lodgings and who'd often let me have goods on credit); consequently she had been planning to go out somewhere, and was probably on the point of opening the door when she suffered the fit. But where had she intended to go? Could she have been already delirious?

In the meantime her fever did not subside but got even worse, rendering her comatose. She had already had two attacks in my lodgings, but each time had managed to recover fully, whereas this time the fever appeared to have taken a turn for the worse. After sitting with

her for about half an hour, I pushed some chairs up against the settee and lay down next to her, fully dressed, to be able to wake up immediately if she called out to me. I left the candle burning. Many were the glances I gave her before I fell asleep. She was pale; her lips were parched and blood-stained, presumably as a result of the fall, while her face wore a permanent expression of fear and a kind of tortured anxiety, which lingered even while she slept. I resolved, if her condition deteriorated, to go for the doctor as early as possible the next day. I was afraid in case her illness developed into full-blown brain fever.

"It was the Prince who frightened her!" I thought with a shudder, recalling his story of the woman who had thrown her money in his face.

2

TWO WEEKS WENT BY; Nelly was beginning to get better. The fever abated, but she still remained seriously ill. She got out of bed towards the end of April on a clear, bright day. It was Holy Week.

Poor child! I cannot continue my story in the same sequence as before. A lot of time has elapsed as I now record all those past events, but the memory of her pale emaciated face still wells up inside me with such relentless, painful force! Those long penetrating looks of her dark eyes when just the two of us were together, and the way she would gaze at me from her bed, staring fixedly as though challenging me to guess what was on her mind, but seeing that I could not and that I remained as puzzled as before, smiling softly as though to herself and suddenly putting out her warm hand with her thin bony fingers extended gently towards me!… Everything is over now, everything is out in the open, yet to this day I have not fathomed all the secrets of that afflicted, exhausted and injured little heart.

I feel I may be digressing from my story, but at this moment I wish to think of nothing but Nelly. Strange to say, as I lie in my hospital bed alone, abandoned by everybody whom I loved so much and so deeply, some suddenly remembered detail from the past – at the time hardly noticed and quickly forgotten – now assumes a totally distinct significance in my mind, resonant and revelatory, shedding light on much that I had hitherto been unable to comprehend.

The first four days of her illness both the doctor and I feared greatly for her, but on the fifth he took me aside and said there was nothing to fear and that she would most certainly recover. It was the same old

bachelor doctor, the kind eccentric I'd called out when Nelly first fell ill and who had impressed her so much with the huge St Stanislas round his neck.

"So you're saying there's nothing to fear!" I said joyfully.

"Yes, she'll get better now, but then before very long she'll die."

"What do you mean, die! Why, for goodness sake!" I exclaimed, shocked by such a pronouncement.

"Yes, she will definitely die soon. The patient suffers from a congenital heart defect, and the slightest unfavourable change in circumstances will incapacitate her again. She may well recover, but then go downhill yet again and eventually die."

"And is there really no way of saving her? No, that's impossible!"

"I'm afraid it is inevitable! Nevertheless, by safeguarding her from distressing situations, letting her relax and enjoy herself more, the patient's life may yet be prolonged, and cases have been known… unexpected… unusual and strange… in a word, in a favourable environment the patient may survive for a long time; as for being restored to full health – never."

"But my God, what's to be done now?"

"Follow my advice, she should observe an ordered way of life and take the prescribed powders regularly. I have noticed the young lady is capricious, of an excitable disposition and a prankster. She is very reluctant to take her powders regularly and has categorically refused to do so even now."

"Yes, doctor. She really is strange, but I put it all down to her morbid irritability. Yesterday she was very compliant. Today, however, when I was giving her medicine, she jolted my arm as if by accident and it was all spilt. When I wanted to dissolve another powder, she snatched the whole packet out of my hand and dashed it to the floor, and then burst into tears… Only I don't somehow think it was because she had to take the powder," I added after reflecting a little.

"Hm! Irritability. Former misfortunes," (I had given the doctor a full and frank account of Nelly's past, which had astonished him greatly) "it is all of a piece, and the result is her illness. For the time being the only remedy is to take the powders, and she must take one now. I'll go to her and try once more to impress upon her the importance of

following medical advice and – that is speaking in general terms – to take the powders."

We both left the kitchen, where our discussion was held, and the doctor again approached the patient's bed. But it appeared Nelly had overheard everything; at least she had lifted her head from the pillows and, having bent her ear in our direction, was all the time listening with rapt attention. I noticed this through the gap in the half-open door. When, however, we went back to her, the little mischief-maker ducked under her blanket again and kept eyeing us with a guileful smile. The poor child had lost a lot of weight in these four days of her illness; her eyes were sunken and she was still flushed with fever – the more striking was the beauty of her roguish expression and her pertly sparkling glances that caused the good doctor, the kindest of all the Germans in St Petersburg, much wonderment.

In all seriousness, but trying to keep his voice as soft as possible, he explained to her in the gentlest and most good-humoured tone possible the all-important need for the powders, with their restorative powers, and consequently every patient's obligation to take them. Nelly was about to raise her head but, suddenly, with what seemed a totally accidental movement of her hand, jolted the spoon and all the medicine again ended up on the floor. I was sure she did it deliberately.

"This is a very unfortunate carelessness," the old man observed calmly, "and I suspect you did it on purpose, which is very naughty. But… we can set that right and dissolve another powder."

Nelly laughed straight in his face.

The doctor shook his head stiffly.

"It is very bad," he said, preparing another solution, "very, very naughty of you."

"Don't be angry with me," replied Nelly, trying desperately not to laugh, "I will take it… but do you love me?"

"If you behave, I will love you very much."

"Very much?"

"Very much."

"But you don't love me now?"

"Now I love you too."

"But will you kiss me if I want to kiss you?"

"Yes, if you prove you deserve it."

Here Nelly was again unable to restrain herself and burst out laughing.

"The patient has a cheerful disposition, but right now she is all nerves and capriciousness," the doctor whispered to me with a most serious air.

"All right then, I'll drink the powder," Nelly suddenly called out in her feeble voice, "but when I grow up tall, will you marry me?"

Apparently the idea of this new prank appealed to her very much; her eyes were simply glowing, while her lips twitched with laughter in anticipation of the somewhat astonished doctor's response.

"All right," he replied, smiling involuntarily at this new caprice, "all right, if you'll be a good and well-behaved girl and will—"

"Take powders?" Nelly interrupted.

"Oh dear! Well yes, take the powders. A nice girl," he whispered to me again, "there is in her a great deal, a very great deal that's… good and clever, but all the same… marriage… what a strange notion?"

And he again offered her the medicine. But this time she did not even attempt to disguise her intention, but simply gave the spoon a knock from below and all the medicine splashed directly over the poor old man's shirt front and face. Nelly burst into a loud peal of laughter, but not of the former good-natured and cheerful kind. Something cruel and malicious flashed across her features. In the course of all this she appeared to be avoiding my eyes and looked only at the doctor – mockingly but with some apprehension too – waiting to see what the "funny" old man would do now.

"Oh! You've done it again… How unfortunate! But… we can dissolve another powder," the old man said, wiping his face and shirt with his handkerchief.

This came as a shock to Nelly. She was expecting us to be angry; expecting us to start scolding her, telling her off, and maybe unconsciously that's just what she wanted most of all at that moment – in order to have an excuse to burst out crying, shrieking as in hysteria, to scatter the powders again as before, and even to break something in a temper and thereby assuage her capricious, afflicted little heart. It is not just sick people who are prone to such caprices, nor is Nelly the only

one. How often had I paced up and down my room with the unconscious desire that someone should hurry up and offend me or say something that could be interpreted as an offence and thus precipitate a crisis, an emotional catharsis. Women, however, who reach such catharses, begin to shed the most heartfelt tears and the more sensitive amongst them end up in hysteria. This phenomenon is altogether very simple and extremely widespread, occurring by and large when there is another, a predominantly secret inner grief gnawing at one's heart, which, however much one would like to share with others, one feels one cannot confide in anyone.

But overwhelmed by the angelic kindness of the old man whom she had offended, and the patience with which he yet again set about dissolving a third powder without having uttered a single word of reproach, Nelly suddenly relaxed. The expression of mockery left her lips, colour suffused her face, her eyes moistened; she threw me a momentary glance and immediately turned away. The doctor approached her with the medicine. She drank it meekly and obediently and, taking hold of the doctor's fleshy red hand, she slowly looked into his eyes.

"You're… angry… that I'm so horrid," she said, but did not finish, dived under her blanket, pulled it over her head and burst into a loud, hysterical fit of crying.

"My child, don't cry… This is nothing… This is nerves. Have a drink of water!"

But Nelly was not listening.

"Take heart… don't get upset…" he continued, barely able to stop himself from weeping, sensitive as he was, "I forgive you and shall marry you if, like a well-behaved, honest young lady, you will—"

"Take the powders!" came the thin, clarion voice from beneath the blanket, interspersed with sobbing and laughter that I knew only too well.

"My good, sensitive child," the doctor said solemnly, almost on the brink of tears. "Poor girl!"

And from then on a strange and surprising empathy developed between him and Nelly. With me, on the contrary, Nelly grew all the more sullen, nervous and irritable. I was at a loss what to ascribe this

to, and was particularly surprised since this change came upon her quite suddenly. In the first days of her illness she was most sensitive and gentle with me; it seemed she could not have enough of my company, would not let me go, would snatch my hand with her own burning one and pull me down beside her, and if she noticed I was gloomy and worried, tried to cheer me up, joked, teased me and smiled at me, apparently making light of her own suffering. She objected to my working late into the night or when I sat up to nurse her, and was upset on seeing that I did not comply. Sometimes I would notice a preoccupied look in her face; when she would start probing and questioning me why I was sad and what was on my mind; strangely enough though, as soon as it came to Natasha she'd immediately grow silent and begin to talk about something else. It was as if she tried to avoid talking about Natasha, and this came as a surprise to me. When I arrived home, she'd be overjoyed. However, when I reached for my hat, she would appear dejected and follow me with a strange, somewhat reproachful, gaze.

On the fourth day of her illness I stayed the whole evening at Natasha's till long after midnight. There were things we needed to talk over. However, when I was leaving home, I told Nelly I'd be back very soon, and had every intention of doing so. Having inadvertently been detained at Natasha's, I was yet quite reassured about Nelly – she was not on her own. With her was Alexandra Semyonovna, who had found out from Masloboyev, after he had called on me briefly, that Nelly was ill and that I was in dire straits and totally on my own. Oh my, how the good Alexandra Semyonovna took it to heart!

"So, this means he won't even come to have dinner with us now!… Goodness me! And all alone, poor chap. Let's go out of our way to be kind to him. An opportunity like that is not to be missed."

She immediately turned up at our place in a cab and carrying a large bundle. Having declared from the first that she would not leave me and had come to help me in my hour of need, she undid her bundle. Out came syrups, jams, specially prepared for the patient, poussins and a chicken – in anticipation of the patient recovering – baking apples, oranges, dry Kiev preserves (if the doctor did not disapprove), and

finally linen, bed sheets, napkins, chemises, bandages, poultices – almost enough to equip a whole hospital.

"We've plenty of everything," she told me, articulating each word in a rushed and anxious way as though in a hurry to get somewhere, "but you lead a bachelor's life. You're short of such things. So do allow me… and it's Filip Filipych's orders. Well then, let's start and get a move on… What's to be done next? How is she? Is she conscious? Oh, she shouldn't be lying like that – let me rearrange the pillow, the head needs to be lower, but you know what… wouldn't a leather cushion be better? Leather's cooler. Oh, how stupid of me! Never occurred to me to bring one. I'll go and fetch it… Shall I make the fire? I'll send you my cleaner. There's an old woman I know. You see, you've no servant in the house… So, what needs to be done next? What's this? Herbal tea… did the doctor prescribe it? I'm sure it's for the chest pains, isn't it? I'll go and make the fire now."

But I calmed her down, and she was most surprised and even saddened that there wasn't really all that much to do. That, however, did not discourage her unduly. She immediately made friends with Nelly and helped me a great deal throughout her illness; she visited us nearly every day and invariably with such an air as though something had gone missing or someone had left and needed to be summoned back urgently. She would always add that those were Filip Filipych's orders. Nelly took a fancy to her. They became very fond of each other, like two sisters, and I dare say Alexandra Semyonovna was in many respects just as much of a child as Nelly. She told her various stories, made her laugh, and Nelly would often miss her after she had left. On her very first appearance at our place, however, she was met with surprise by my patient who immediately guessed the reason behind the uninvited guest's arrival and, as was her wont, began even to furrow her brow, stopped talking and became unsociable.

"Why did she come here?" she asked, putting on a dissatisfied air when Alexandra Semyonovna had left.

"To help you, Nelly, and to look after you."

"Is that so?… Why should she though? I've done nothing for her."

"Good people don't stop to wait for others to do things for them, Nelly. They like to help people in need regardless. Come now, Nelly,

there are many good people in the world. Your trouble has been that you never come across any and there were none around when you needed them."

Nelly fell silent; I drew away from her. But a quarter of an hour later she herself called me over in a weak voice, asked for something to drink and suddenly flung her arms around me tightly, nestled against my chest and would not let go of me for a long time. The next day when Alexandra Semyonovna called, she met her with a cheerful smile, though for some reason she still seemed to be flustered in her presence.

3

THAT DAY I SPENT THE WHOLE EVENING at Natasha's. I arrived home late. Nelly was asleep. Alexandra Semyonovna had also wanted to sleep, but sat with the patient waiting for me. She immediately proceeded to inform me in a hurried whisper that Nelly had been very cheerful at first, even laughed a lot, but then became downhearted and, on seeing that I wasn't coming back, became quiet and thoughtful. "Then she began to complain of headache, started to cry and worked herself up into such a state that I really didn't know what to do with her," Alexandra Semyonovna added. "She started talking to me about Natalya Nikolayevna, but there was nothing I could tell her, so she stopped questioning me and just went on crying, which is how she fell asleep, in tears. Well, goodbye then, Ivan Petrovich. I think she's better, but I must be off home – Filip Filipych's orders. I might as well admit to you, he only let me go for about a couple of hours this time, but I decided to stay. But never mind, don't worry about me. He wouldn't dare to make a fuss… Only there's one thing… Oh, my God, Ivan Petrovich dear, what am I to do – he always comes home tipsy now! He's very busy over something, he won't speak to me, he's down in the dumps, there's an important matter weighing on his mind. I can see it all, but come the evening he's drunk all the same… That reminds me, he'll be home by now, and who's going to put him to bed? Well, I'm off, I am, goodbye. Goodbye, Ivan Petrovich. I was looking at your books here – you've got such a lot, I shouldn't wonder if they're all ever so clever too, and here's me a fool, never read a thing in my life… Well, see you tomorrow…"

But the next day Nelly woke up sad and dejected and wasn't forthcoming in her responses to me. Nor would she start up a conversation herself as though she had some grudge against me. I only caught a few fleeting glances cast at me furtively; in these glances there was a lot of repressed inner pain, but nevertheless they were relieved by glimpses of tenderness which were absent when she looked at me directly. It was on this day that the scene with the doctor and the administering of the medicine took place. I was at a loss what to think.

But Nelly's attitude towards me changed radically. Her quirks, caprices – sometimes almost detestation of me – continued to the very day when she left my place for good, right up to the catastrophe which spelt the end of our romance. But of this later.

There were times, however, when for an hour or so she would be affectionate to me as formerly. Her tenderness, it seemed, redoubled on these occasions, though more often than not she would cry bitterly at the same time. But these hours would pass quickly and she would again relapse into her habitual moodiness, regard me with hostility or indulge in some such caprice as with the doctor or, noticing that I was objecting to some new prank of hers, would suddenly begin to laugh, but almost invariably end up crying.

Once she quarrelled even with Alexandra Semyonovna and told her she wanted nothing more to do with her. When, however, I started telling her off in front of Alexandra Semyonovna, she lost her temper, replied in curt snatches charged with pent-up anger, and suddenly lapsed into silence, not uttering a single word for the next two days, during which time she stopped taking her medicine altogether, even refused to eat or drink, and it was only the old doctor who managed to mollify her and persuade her to be reasonable.

I have mentioned already that right from the day of the administering of the medicine a surprising empathy had developed between her and the doctor. Nelly grew to like him very much and always greeted him with a cheerful smile, no matter how sad she happened to be before his arrival. For his part the old man began to visit us every day, sometimes twice a day, even after Nelly had left her sickbed and recovered completely, and it appeared she had charmed him to the extent that he was unable to survive a single day without hearing her laughter and

jokes at his expense, not infrequently rather amusing ones. He began to bring her picture books, all with a moral to them. One such he bought especially for her. Then he started bringing her various titbits and sweets in pretty boxes. On those occasions he would make a solemn and heroic entrance, and Nelly would immediately guess that he had come with a present. He would not reveal it though, but merely laugh slyly, sit down next to her, and drop hints that if a certain young lady knew how to behave herself and earn respect in his absence, then such a lady would deserve a generous reward. Saying this he kept looking at her so candidly and amiably that Nelly even while laughing at him in the most blatant manner possible, nevertheless could not fail to exude genuine, warm attachment in her gaze, which brightened on the instant. Finally the old man would rise solemnly from his chair, produce the box of sweets and, presenting it to Nelly, would invariably add, "To my future, beloved wife." On such occasion he was probably happier than Nelly.

After that it was time for talking, and he always seriously and persuasively implored her to look after her health, and gave her sound medical advice.

"Above all it is necessary to look after your health," he would say in a dogmatic tone of voice, "first and foremost, to stay alive, and secondly, to be always healthy and thus attain happiness in life. If you are, my dear child, beset by some grief in life, then try to forget it, or better still not think about it at all. If however you don't have any kind of grief, then… don't think about it either, but try to think of pleasant things… of something cheerful and amusing…"

"But what is there cheerful and amusing to think of?" Nelly asked.

The doctor would immediately find himself nonplussed.

"Well, now… about some innocent game, appropriate to your age. Or, let me see now… well, something that's—"

"I don't want to play. I don't like playing games," Nelly replied. "I like new frocks much more."

"New frocks! Hm. Well, that's not so good. One must in everything be content with a modest share in life. On the other hand… no matter… it's all right to like new frocks too."

"Will you make me lots of new frocks after we're married?"

"What an idea!" the doctor said, involuntarily knitting his brows. Nelly smiled mischievously, and once, forgetting herself, glanced over at me too, beaming. "But now you mention it… I will make you a dress if you earn it by your behaviour," the doctor went on.

"And will I still have to take the powders every day after I marry you?"

"Well, then you might sometimes be excused from taking the powders," and the doctor would begin to smile.

Nelly used to interrupt such conversations with a burst of laughter. The old doctor laughed with her and with a loving eye took note of her cheerful disposition.

"A playful mind!" he said, turning to me. "But there's still capriciousness in evidence and a certain fastidiousness and irritability."

He was right. I really was at a loss as to what was the matter with her. She appeared not to want to talk to me at all, as though I were guilty of something. I felt very bitter about it. I became irritated and on one occasion I would not speak to her a whole day, but the next day I felt ashamed of myself. Often she would cry, and I had no idea at all how to comfort her. However, one day she broke her silence.

I returned home before dark and saw Nelly hastily hide a book under her pillow. It was my novel, which she had taken from the table to read in my absence. But why hide it from me? "It's as though she's embarrassed," I thought to myself but did not let on that I had seen anything. A quarter of an hour later when I walked into the kitchen for a minute, she quickly jumped out of bed and replaced the novel in its original position. When I returned, I saw it was already lying on the table. A minute later she called me over; there was some anxiety in her voice. It was almost four days since she had spoken to me last.

"Are you… going… to Natasha's today?" she asked me in a faltering voice.

"Yes, Nelly. It's important that I see her today."

Nelly went silent.

"You… love her a lot?" she asked again in a feeble voice.

"Yes, Nelly, I love her very much."

"And I love her too," she added softly. There was another pause.

"I want to go to her and live with her," Nelly began again, casting me a meek glance.

"That's not possible, Nelly," I replied, somewhat surprised. "Don't you like it here?"

"Why not possible?" she remonstrated. "Haven't you been trying to persuade me to go and live with her father, which I don't want to do? Has she got a maid?"

"She has."

"Well, let her dismiss her maid, and I'll wait upon her. I'll do everything for her and won't charge her a thing. I'll love her and cook meals for her. Tell her that today."

"But what for? This is sheer fantasy, Nelly! And what an idea you have of her? Do you really think she'd agree to take you on as a cook? If she were to take you, it'd be as an equal, as a younger sister."

"No, I don't want to be equal. I don't want it like that…"

"But why?"

Nelly was silent. Her lips were quivering. She was on the point of crying.

"The man she's in love with now is going to go away and leave her, isn't he?" she asked at last.

I was astonished.

"But how do you know that, Nelly?"

"You told me everything yourself, and the other day when Alexandra Semyonovna's husband came here in the morning, I asked him and he told me everything."

"I say, was Masloboyev really here in the morning?"

"He was," she replied, looking down.

"And why didn't you tell me that?"

"I don't know…"

I thought for a moment, "What business did Masloboyev have to act the clown? What was his motive?" I had to see him.

"So what is it to you, Nelly, if he leaves her?"

"You love her a lot, don't you?" Nelly replied without raising her eyes. "And if you love her, it means you'll marry her after he's gone."

"No, Nelly, she doesn't love me as I do her, and I too… No, that won't happen, Nelly."

"And I'd have waited upon both of you like your servant," she said almost in a whisper, not looking at me, "and you'd have lived and enjoyed yourselves.

"What's the matter with her, what's wrong with her!" I thought to myself, and felt a sudden pang of distress. Nelly fell silent and did not say a single word more for the rest of the evening. However, after I left, she began to cry and cried the whole night through, as Alexandra Semyonovna informed me, and that was how she fell asleep, in tears. She cried even during her sleep and continued to speak deliriously.

But from that day on she became ever more sullen and uncommunicative, and would not speak to me at all. True, I caught two or three glances which she cast at me furtively and that were so full of tenderness! But this passed, together with the instant that had evoked this unexpected tenderness, and as though in response to this momentary relaxation, Nelly grew more melancholy almost by the hour, even with the doctor, who was surprised by the change in her demeanour. In the meantime she recovered almost completely, and the doctor at last allowed her to go out in the fresh air, only not for very long. The weather was bright and warm. It was Holy Week, which that year fell very late. I went out in the morning; I needed to see Natasha urgently, but was determined to be back early, so as to take Nelly for a walk; for the while I left her at home on her own.

But I cannot describe the shock that awaited me on my return. I was making my way home in something of a hurry. On reaching the front door I saw the key inserted in the keyhole from the outside. I went in – no one there. I was stunned. I looked around. On the table was a piece of paper and pencilled on it in a large uneven hand:

I have left you and shall never come back to you. But I love you very much.

Your faithful Nelly

I cried out in horror and rushed out of the house.

4

I HAD SCARCELY RUN OUT INTO THE STREET, and before I had time to consider what was to be done next, I suddenly saw a droshky pull up at our gate with Alexandra Semyonovna stepping down, leading Nelly by the arm. She was holding her tightly as though afraid she might run off again. I rushed towards them.

"Nelly, what's the matter with you!" I cried out. "Where did you go? Why?"

"No need to worry yourself!" Alexandra Semyonovna interjected chirpily. "Let's go inside quickly and we'll talk about it there, "The things I'll tell you, Ivan Petrovich," she whispered hurriedly on the way. "It's simply unbelievable… Let's go inside, you'll hear everything."

It was written all over her face that she had some extraordinarily important news to impart.

"Go along, Nelly, go on, lie down for a while," she said after we entered my room. "You must be tired. All that running around was no joke, even harder after an illness. Lie down, my darling, lie down. Meanwhile Vanya and I will leave you so as not to disturb you and let you have a good sleep." And she winked at me to follow her into the kitchen.

But Nelly did not lie down, she sat down on the settee and buried her face in her hands.

We left the room, and Alexandra Semyonovna hurriedly told me what had happened. Subsequently I learnt even more details. This is how events unfolded.

Having left my place about two hours before my return and written me the note, Nelly had first run to the old doctor's. She'd already obtained his address earlier. In the doctor's own words, he was absolutely stunned when he saw Nelly turn up at his place, and all the time she was with him, he just could not believe his eyes. "And I still can't," he added in conclusion of his story, "and never shall." And yet Nelly really had visited him. He had been sitting in his study in an armchair, in his dressing gown drinking coffee, when she burst in and fell round his neck before he even had time to realize what was happening. She kept crying, she hugged and kissed him; she kissed his hands and implored him earnestly though incoherently to let her come and live with him; she said she could not and would not live with me any longer, which is why she had left me; that it was difficult for her; that she would not tease him any more or talk of new frocks and would behave well, learn to do things, launder and iron his shirts, (she probably made all this up on her way to him, or perhaps even earlier) and finally that she'd always do as she was told and, even if it meant every day, she'd take whatever powders were necessary. And if she had previously said she wished to marry him, it was only a joke, and that she no longer even thought of it. The old German was so shaken that all the while he just sat there open-mouthed, quite oblivious of the fact that the cigar he was holding in his uplifted hand had long gone out.

"Mademoiselle," he said at last, having regained partial use of his tongue, "Mademoiselle, as far as I am able to understand, you are asking me to accommodate you here. But that is impossible! You can see, I am very cramped here and have no substantial income… And finally, this is so unexpected, so ill considered… It is terrible! And, finally, you have as far as I can see, run away from your home. This is very unpraiseworthy and impossible… And, finally, I let you walk only a little, on a bright day under your benefactor's supervision, but you have left your benefactor and have run to me, whereas you should be taking care of yourself and… and… taking your medicine. And, finally… finally, I cannot understand anything—"

Nelly did not allow him to finish. She started to cry and beg him, but it was all to no avail. The dear old man, bless him, was getting more and more confused and flustered, and unable to comprehend a thing.

At last Nelly gave up and, crying out "Oh my God!" ran out of the room. "I was ill the rest of that day," the doctor added at the conclusion of his story, "and took a decoction before I went to bed…"

Nelly then rushed to the Masloboyevs. She had their address at hand too and managed to find them, though not without difficulty. Masloboyev was at home. Alexandra Semyonovna simply gasped when she heard Nelly begging to be allowed to stay with them. When questioned as to why she wanted to and whether she was finding it difficult at my place or something – Nelly did not respond but slumped, sobbing, into a chair. "She sobbed, she sobbed so much," Alexandra Semyonovna recounted, "that I thought she'd die of it." Nelly was prepared to be a chambermaid, a cook if need be; she said she'd sweep floors and would learn to launder. (Laundering was something Nelly laid a great deal of store by and for some reason considered it to be her greatest asset in her efforts to find work.) Alexandra Semyonovna was of the opinion that they should let her stay with them till the matter was clarified, and I should be informed. But Filip Filipych turned this down flat and ordered the fugitive to be returned to me forthwith. On the way Alexandra Semyonovna had hugged and kissed her, only causing Nelly to cry even more. Looking at her, Alexandra Semyonovna too had begun to cry. Thus the two of them had cried all the way.

"Why, why on earth, Nelly, don't you want to live with him?" Alexandra Semyonovna asked, tears streaming down her face. "Has he been unkind to you, or what?"

"No, he hasn't."

"Well, why then?"

"I just don't want to live with him… I can't… " she said, crying hysterically. "I'm so mean to him… and he's so nice… but with you I shan't be mean, I'll work."

"Why are you so mean to him then, Nelly?…"

"I just am…"

"And this 'I just am' is all I managed to get out of her," Alexandra Semyonovna concluded, wiping her tears. "Why is she so wretched? Is it her illness, or what? What do you think, Ivan Petrovich?"

We went back to Nelly; she was lying with her face buried in the pillows and crying. I knelt down in front of her, took her hands and

started kissing them. She tore her hands free and cried all the more. I simply did not know what to say. Just then Ikhmenev entered.

"I'm here to see you on business, Ivan, hello!" he said, looking at everybody and surprised to see me on my knees. Ikhmenev had been ill all the time lately. He was pale and emaciated but appeared to be putting a brave face on it, made light of his illness, refused to listen to Anna Andreyevna's admonitions, and would not take to his bed but continued to go about his business as usual.

"Goodbye for now," Alexandra Semyonovna said with a sidelong glance at Ikhmenev. "Filip Filipych ordered me to return as soon as possible. We've some business to attend to. To be sure, I'll look in again in the evening for an hour or two."

"Who was that?" Ikhmenev whispered to me, his mind clearly on something else. I explained.

"Hm. And I'm here on business, you see, Ivan…"

I knew what his business was, and had been expecting him. He had come to talk to me and Nelly in order to take her with him. Anna Andreyevna had finally agreed to take the orphan into their home. It all happened during one of our secret talks; I reasoned with Anna Andreyevna and managed to persuade her that the sight of the orphan whose mother had also been cast off by her father might possibly turn the old man's mind to other thoughts. I explained my plan to her so vividly that she herself started to urge her husband to take the orphan. The old man embraced the idea readily. First, he wanted to oblige Anna Andreyevna, and secondly he had his own special reasons… But I shall explain all this in greater detail later…

I mentioned already that Nelly took a dislike to Ikhmenev from his very first visit. I later noticed that her face even betrayed a kind of hatred every time his name cropped up in her hearing. He broached the subject straight away without further ado. He went directly up to Nelly, who was still lying there, her face hidden in the cushions and, taking her by her hand, asked if she'd like to come to live with him in place of his daughter.

"I had a daughter, I loved her more than anything in the world," Ikhmenev concluded, "but now she's no longer with me. She is dead. Would you like to take her place in my house and… in my heart?"

And his eyes, inflamed and dry after his illness, misted over with tears.

"No, I wouldn't," Nelly replied without lifting her head.

"Why ever not, my child? You're all alone. Ivan cannot keep you with him for ever, whereas you would be perfectly at home in my house."

"I don't want to because you're nasty. Yes, nasty, nasty," she added, lifting her head and sitting up on the bed to face the old man. "I'm nasty myself, nastier than anyone, but you're even nastier than me!…" saying this, Nelly turned pale, her eyes glinted; even her quivering lips grew pale and twisted under the onset of some strong emotion. Ikhmenev looked at her in consternation.

"Yes, nastier than me, because you don't want to forgive your own daughter. You want to forget her altogether and replace her with another child, as if one could forget one's own child? You're not going to love me, are you? Because as soon as you look at me, you'll remember at once that I'm a stranger and that you had a daughter of your own, whom you've forgotten, because you're a cruel man. I don't want to live with cruel people, I don't, I don't!…" Nelly ran out of breath and shot me a quick glance.

"The day after tomorrow it'll be Easter, people will say, 'Christ has risen,' everyone will embrace and kiss one another, everyone will make peace and their wrongs will be forgiven… I know it… You're the only one, you… ugh! You're cruel! Go away!"

She was overwhelmed with tears. She had probably worked on this speech and rehearsed it a long time just in case the old man were to invite her again to live in his house. Ikhmenev was flabbergasted and grew pale. A pained expression appeared on his face.

"And why, why, why on earth should everyone be so worried about me? I don't want it, I don't!" Nelly suddenly exclaimed in some kind of paroxysm. "I'll go and beg in the street!"

"Nelly, what's the matter with you? Nelly, my dear child!" I cried out involuntarily, but my exclamation only served to add fuel to the fire.

"Yes, I'd rather go begging in the streets, but I'm not staying here," she cried, sobbing. "My mother too asked for charity, and when she was dying, she told me herself – best stay poor and ask for charity, rather than… There's nothing wrong in asking for charity. It's not as though I was asking one person, I'm asking everybody, and everybody

isn't the same as one. To ask one person is shameful, to ask everybody is not. That's what one beggar woman once told me. I'm small, I've no one to turn to. That's why I ask everybody. But I don't want to stay here, I don't, I don't, I don't. I'm nasty. I'm nastier than anyone. That's how nasty I am!"

And Nelly quite unexpectedly grabbed a cup from the table and smashed it on the floor.

"There, it's broken now," she said, looking at me in a kind of defiant triumph. "We only had two cups," she added, "and I'll break the other one too… How will you drink your tea then?"

She was in a foul mood and appeared to be delighting in her fury; as though conscious of it being both unbecoming and disgraceful, yet deliberately working herself up into further tantrums.

"You've a sick child on your hands, Vanya, that's what," Ikhmenev said, "or… I don't understand the girl at all. Goodbye."

He took his cap and shook my hand. He was totally mortified; Nelly had insulted him to the core; I was ready to explode.

"You had no pity on him, Nelly!" I exclaimed after we were left alone. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I'll say that again! Yes, you're not a good girl, you really are nasty!" And just as I was, without picking up my hat, I rushed out in pursuit of the old man. I wanted to see him as far as the house gate and, if nothing else, say a couple of words to comfort him. Rushing down the stairs I thought I could see Nelly's face before me dreadfully pale after my reprimand.

I soon caught up with Ikhmenev.

"The poor girl has been wronged and has her own grief to contend with, believe me, Ivan, and there I was going on about my own," he said, smiling ruefully. "I opened up an old wound. They say the sated and the hungry make bad bedfellows, but I'd add that the hungry and the hungry scarcely make any better. Well, goodbye!"

I was about to make some remark, but the old man brushed it aside.

"No need to comfort me. Better see she doesn't run off from you – you can see it in her eyes," he added with some kind of malice and strode off quickly, swinging his stick about and tapping with it on the pavement.

Little did he know that his words would prove prophetic.

Imagine my horror when, on returning to my room, I found Nelly was yet again not there! I rushed into the passage, looked for her on the stairwell, called her name, even knocked on neighbours' doors to ask for her; I could not and did not want to believe that she had run away again. Anyway, how could she have run away? There was only one gate to the building; she would have had to walk past us when I was talking to Ikhmenev. But soon to my consternation I realized that she could have hidden herself somewhere on the staircase and waited till I had walked past on my way back and then have slipped out, thereby eluding me. Be that as it may, she couldn't have got very far.

Leaving the door to my lodgings unlocked just in case, I rushed out in utmost agitation to look for her again.

I first went to the Masloboyevs. They were both out. Having left a note in which I informed them of my new calamity and asked them to let me know immediately if Nelly turned up at their place, I went to the doctor's; he wasn't in either; his housekeeper informed me that Nelly had not been back since her previous visit. What was to be done? I set off for Bubnova's and learnt from the coffin-maker's wife, whom I knew, that her landlady had the previous day been taken for some reason into custody by the police, and Nelly hadn't been seen there at all since *that day*. Tired and exhausted, I rushed back to the Masloboyevs. Still the same response – "No one's been here, and the gentleman himself hasn't been back yet either." My note was still lying on the table. What was I to do?

Utterly broken, I started making my way home late that night. I ought to have been at Natasha's that evening; she herself had asked me that very morning to call on her. But I hadn't even eaten anything all day; the thought of Nelly preoccupied me completely. "What is all this?" I thought. "Could it be some weird consequence of her illness? Perhaps she is mentally sick after all, or becoming so? But, my God, where is she now, where will I find her?"

This had barely flashed through my mind when suddenly I caught sight of Nelly on the Voznesensky Bridge, not far away. She was standing under a lamp post and did not see me. I wanted to run to her, but stopped. "What is she doing here?" I thought, baffled, and confident that I wouldn't lose her this time, decided to watch her. About ten

minutes passed, she was still standing, glancing at the passers-by. At last an elderly well-dressed gentleman passed and Nelly approached him; without stopping, he took something out of his pocket and handed it to Nelly. She curtsied. I cannot describe what I experienced at that moment. I felt a sharp stab of pain in my heart, as though something precious, something I loved, treasured and cherished, was vilified and sullied before my very eyes at that moment, but at the same time tears rolled down my cheeks.

Yes, tears for my poor Nelly, even while at one and the same time I experienced an irreconcilable indignation – she was not begging out of need; she had not been abandoned, not cast out by anyone to fend for herself; she hadn't run away from cruel taskmasters, but from her friends, who loved and cherished her. It was as though she were trying to shock or frighten someone by her exploits; as though she were trying to impress someone. But something mysterious was stirring in her heart… Yes, Ikhmenev was right; she had been wronged, her wound could not have healed, and it was as if she were deliberately trying to aggravate it by this air of mystery, this mistrust of us all; as if she were savouring her own pain and revelling in this *selfish orgy of suffering*, if I may put it that way. This rubbing of salt into the wound and taking pleasure in the act were familiar to me; it is the last refuge of the many who've been offended and humiliated, who've been oppressed by fate and are conscious of its unfairness. But what sort of unfairness from us could Nelly complain of? It was as if she wanted to surprise and shock us with her caprices and wild tantrums, as if she really wanted to posture in front of us… But no! She was on her own now, none of us would see her begging. Was she really deriving pleasure in this for its own sake? Why would she need charity? Why would she need the money?

Having received the money, she left the bridge and approached the brightly lit windows of a shop. Here she began to count her takings; I stood some ten paces from her. She had a reasonable sum of money in her hand; it would seem she'd been begging since the morning. Clutching it in her hand, she crossed the street and entered a shop selling various odds and ends. I immediately approached the shop door, which was wide open, to see what she'd do next.

I saw her putting the money on the counter and being handed a cup, a plain teacup, very much like the one she had smashed to show Ikhmenev and myself how nasty she was. This cup would have cost about fifteen kopecks, perhaps even less. The shopkeeper wrapped it in paper, tied it up and handed it to Nelly, who then looking well pleased hurriedly left the shop.

"Nelly!" I exclaimed, when she drew level with me. "Nelly!"

She gave a start, glanced at me, the cup slipped from her fingers, fell on the pavement and broke. Nelly was pale; but, having looked at me and realizing that I had seen and knew everything, she suddenly blushed; this blush conveyed unbearable, agonized embarrassment. I took her by the hand and led her home; we had not far to go. Not a word passed between us on the way. On arriving home, I sat down; Nelly was standing before me broody and embarrassed, pale and wan as before, her eyes cast to the ground. She could not bring herself to look at me.

"Nelly, you were begging?"

"Yes!" she whispered, and her head drooped even lower.

"You wanted to get enough money to buy a cup like the one you broke this morning?"

"Yes…"

"But did I hold it against you, did I tell you off for that cup? Don't you really see, Nelly, how much wickedness, wilful wickedness there is in what you did? Is that good, I ask you? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Aren't you?…"

"I am…" she whispered barely audibly, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"You are, aren't you?" I said. "Nelly, my darling, if I have offended you, forgive me and let's be friends."

She glanced at me, tears streamed from her eyes and she fell against my chest.

At this moment Alexandra Semyonovna rushed in.

"What! Is she home? Again? Oh Nelly, what's happening to you? Well it's good that at least you're back… where did you find her, Ivan Petrovich?"

I winked at Alexandra Semyonovna not to ask questions, and she understood me. I gently said goodbye to Nelly, who was still crying bitterly and, having persuaded the kind Alexandra Semyonovna to stay with her till my return, ran off to Natasha's. I was late and had to hurry.

That evening our fate was to be decided. Natasha and I had lots to talk about, but nevertheless I managed to tell her in great detail about everything that had happened to Nelly. My story fascinated Natasha and even astonished her.

"You know what, Vanya," she said on reflection, "I think she is in love with you."

"What… what did you say?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, it's the beginning of love, a woman's love…"

"Come now, Natasha, really! She's only a child!"

"Who'll soon be fourteen. This hostility is all because you don't understand her love which, come to think of it, she probably doesn't understand herself either; there's a great deal of childishness in her hostility, but it's serious and distressing for all that. The main thing is she's jealous of me. You love me so much that when you're at home, your mind's probably wholly on me alone and you think and talk of nothing else but me, and consequently you have little time for her. She has noticed it, and has been stung. Maybe she wants to talk to you, feels the need for drawing you into her confidence, doesn't know how to, feels embarrassed, can't control her emotions, can't wait for an opportunity, whereas instead of making it easy for her, you're distancing yourself from her, running away from her to see me, and even when she was ill you left her for days on end on her own to be with me. That's the reason for her crying – she misses you, and what hurts her most of all is that you seem completely unaware of it. Even now, at a moment like this, you left her on her own to come to me. She'll be ill tomorrow because of that. And how could you leave her? Go back to her quickly…"

"I wouldn't have left her, but…"

"I know, I myself asked you to come. But you should go now…"

"I shall, only of course I don't believe any of this."

"Because it's so out of the ordinary. Just think of her story, and after you've taken everything into account, you'll believe it all right. She didn't have the same upbringing as you or I did…"

It was already late when I returned. Alexandra Semyonovna told me that Nelly had cried a lot again like the other night and had cried herself to sleep as on the previous occasion. "But I'll be going now, Ivan Petrovich – Filip Filipych's orders, you know. He'll be waiting for me, poor soul."

I thanked her and sat down at the head of Nelly's bed. I felt awful that I could have left her on her own at such a moment. I sat with her a long time, late into the night, lost in thought… These were indeed fateful times.

But I must recount what had been happening during these two weeks…

5

AFTER THE MEMORABLE EVENING spent in Borel's restaurant with the Prince, I passed the next few days in constant anxiety over Natasha. "What could the accursed Prince be threatening Natasha with and how was he going to take his revenge on her?" I kept asking myself, and was lost in various surmises. At last I came to the conclusion that his were no empty threats, no braggadocio, and that while she was living with Alyosha, he could indeed cause her a great deal of trouble. He was petty, vindictive, nasty and calculating, I thought. It was hard to imagine that he could forget an insult and not take the opportunity to get his own back. In any case he had made one thing in particular clear and had spoken fairly unambiguously about it: he was quite insistent that Alyosha and Natasha should part and expected that I should prepare her to brace herself for it soon, and in such a way that "there should be no scenes, no sentimentalities or any of that Schiller-type nonsense". It goes without saying that his main concern was that Alyosha should be well pleased with him and should continue to regard him as a kind-hearted father, which he needed badly in order subsequently to appropriate Katya's money all the more easily. And so I had to prepare Natasha for the forthcoming separation. But I noticed a great change in Natasha; there was not a trace of her former openness with me – more than that, she seemed to have become almost mistrustful of me. My words of comfort simply tormented her; my questions annoyed her more and more, even upset her. I'd be with her, watching her – she would pace up and down the room, her arms folded, gloomy, pale, as though in a trance, oblivious even of my presence close by. If she

happened to glance at me (she even tried to avoid looking me in the eyes), a short-tempered restlessness would suddenly flit across her features and she'd quickly look the other way. I could see she was perhaps considering some plan of her own to do with the impending break-up, and could she really have been turning it over in her mind without a sense of pain, of bitterness? I for one was convinced that she had already resolved upon the break-up. Nevertheless her dark despair tormented and frightened me. And I sometimes didn't even dare to talk to her or comfort her, and therefore bided my time with trepidation to see how it would all resolve itself.

As for her severe and uncompromising attitude towards me, even though this distressed and pained me, I was confident of Natasha's good nature, and could see how difficult it was for her and how upset she was. Any outside interference only irritated her and made her angry. In such cases interference, especially from close friends who know our secrets, becomes particularly burdensome. But I also knew very well that at the last moment Natasha would turn to me again for consolation.

Of course I made no mention to her of my conversation with the Prince, which would have agitated and upset her even more. I only told her in passing that I had been to see the Countess with him and was more than ever convinced that he was an out-and-out scoundrel. But she did not even question me about him, for which I was very grateful; on the other hand she listened avidly to everything I told her about my meeting with Katya. Having heard me out, she did not comment on that either, only her pale cheeks suddenly coloured, and all the rest of that day she was in a state of unusual agitation. I did not conceal anything regarding Katya and admitted that she had made a wonderful impression even on me. Anyway, why should I have concealed anything? Natasha would have guessed that I was hiding something and would only have been angry with me. And therefore I deliberately went into as much detail as possible, trying to anticipate all her questions, the more so since in her situation it was difficult for her to question me herself. Truly it could be no easy matter to enquire under the guise of indifference about the virtues of one's rival!

I thought she still did not know that, on the Prince's express orders, Alyosha was to accompany the Countess and Katya to the country, and was wondering how best to broach it to her, so as to soften the blow as much as possible. But what was my surprise when Natasha, after my very first words, stopped me short and said that there was no need to *console* her, that she'd already known about it these past five days.

"My goodness!" I exclaimed. "Who told you?"

"Alyosha."

"What? He did?"

"Yes, and I'm ready for anything, Vanya," she added in an exasperated tone clearly designed to put an end to all my attempts to continue the conversation.

Alyosha had been visiting Natasha quite often but always briefly, and only on one occasion did he stay for several hours, but that was in my absence. Normally he would turn up gloomy, look at her meekly and tenderly, but Natasha would welcome him so warmly, so gladly that he'd immediately forget everything and cheer up. He also began to visit me very frequently, nearly every day. There was no doubt that he was very distressed and unable to come to terms with his grief even for a moment, which was why he constantly came running to me for consolation.

What could I say to him? He accused me of being apathetic, indifferent, even of being hostile to him; he moped, shed tears and always went back to Katya's to seek succour there.

On the day Natasha announced to me she knew about the trip to the country (this was about a week after my conversation with the Prince), he came running to me in despair, embraced me and fell upon my shoulder, crying like a child. I did not say a word and waited to hear what he'd have to say.

"I'm vile and objectionable, Vanya," he began, "save me from myself! I'm not crying because I'm vile and a objectionable, but because Natasha will be miserable because of me. Let's face it, I'm condemning her to unhappiness… Vanya, my friend, tell me, decide for me, which of the two I love more – Katya or Natasha?"

"That's not something I can decide, Alyosha," I replied, "you ought to know that better than I—"

"No, Vanya, that's not it. You know I'm not so stupid as to be asking such questions, but the worst of it is, I've no idea myself. I keep on asking myself and cannot find an answer. But you're looking at it from the outside, and perhaps you know more… Well, even if you don't know, tell me all the same how you see it."

"The way I see it, you love Katya more."

"You think so! No, no, it's not like that at all! You couldn't be more wrong. I love Natasha beyond all measure. I can never see myself leaving her for whatever reason. I've told Katya as much, and she thoroughly agrees with me. Why don't you say something? There, I saw you smile just now. Oh, Vanya, you never are any help to me when it is all too much for me like now… Goodbye!"

He ran out of the room, leaving Nelly, who had been listening to our conversation in silence, completely baffled. She was still ill at the time, lying in bed and taking her medicine. Alyosha never spoke to her during his visits, never paying her any attention whatsoever.

Two hours later he was back again, and I was astonished to see how happy he looked. He again fell round my neck and embraced me.

"Everything's settled!" he exclaimed, "all misunderstandings have been resolved. After I left you, I went straight to Natasha's. I was upset, I could not be without her. When I saw her, I fell to my knees before her and kissed her feet. I had to do it, I wanted to do it, I'd have died of sorrow if I hadn't. She put her arms around me in silence and began to cry. That's when I told her straight out I loved Katya more than her…"

"And what was her reaction?"

"She wouldn't say a thing, she only kissed and comforted me – me, after I'd said that to her! She's so understanding, Ivan Petrovich! Oh, I cried my heart out to her, I told her everything. I told her plainly that I loved Katya very much, but that no matter how much I loved her or whoever, I could nevertheless not do without her, Natasha, and would rather die. Yes, Vanya, I just can't survive a day without her, I feel it, yes! And therefore we decided to get married immediately. But as it can't be done before I go away, seeing as it's still Lent and no one will marry us, it'll have to be after my return, which will be about the first of June. Father won't object, of that there can be no doubt. As regards

Katya, so what! Let's face it, I can't live without Natasha… We'll marry and then go off together to join Katya…"

Poor Natasha! That she should have been comforting this youth, this naive egoist, have sat by him, listened to his confessions and, just to put his mind at rest, invented the myth of the forthcoming wedding! For a few days Alyosha really seemed to have calmed down. He kept dashing over to Natasha's because, weak-willed as he was, he could not endure sorrow on his own. Nevertheless, when the time for parting drew closer, he again became distraught, tearful and once more came running to me to pour out his woes. In the end he became so attached to Natasha that he could not leave her for a single day, let alone a month and a half. However, he was completely convinced right up to the last moment that he was leaving her only for a month and half, and that on his return they would get married. As for Natasha, she was well aware that her whole destiny was about to change, that Alyosha would never return to her, and that that was how it would all turn out.

The day of their parting was drawing near. Natasha was ill – pale, her eyes puffed, her lips parched – she would occasionally mutter something to herself; she would occasionally cast me a quick penetrating glance, but without crying, without responding to my questions, and would shudder as a leaf on a tree whenever Alyosha's ringing voice announced his arrival. She would light up like the sky at sunrise and rush to welcome him, embrace him convulsively, cover him with kisses and laugh… Alyosha would gaze into her eyes, sometimes ask her anxiously if she was well, comfort her that he was not going away for long and that their wedding would follow. Natasha made every effort to suppress her feelings and overcome her tears. She never cried in front of him.

On one occasion he mentioned that he ought to leave her some money to tide her over in his absence, and that she needn't worry, because his father had promised to give him a lot for the journey. Natasha frowned. When we were left on our own, I announced that I had a hundred and fifty roubles for her, just in case. She did not enquire where the money came from. This was two days before Alyosha's departure and on the eve of Natasha's first and last meeting with Katya. Katya had sent a note with Alyosha, in which she asked for permission to visit Natasha

the next day; in addition, she also wrote to me asking me too to be present at the meeting.

Even though I had more than enough on my plate, I decided come what may to be at Natasha's at twelve o'clock (as stipulated by Katya). Nelly apart, I had recently had a lot of bother with the Ikhmenevs too.

It had started about a week earlier. One morning Anna Andreyevna sent for me, asking me to drop everything and hurry to her on a very important matter which brooked not the slightest delay. When I arrived I found her alone – she was walking up and down the room, shivering in fear and trepidation, anxiously awaiting Nikolai Sergeich's return. As usual it took me a long time to learn from her what the matter was and why she was so alarmed, and at the same time every minute was evidently very precious. Finally, after a series of heated and irrelevant reprimands – "Why've you not been to see us, abandoning us to our fate in a moment of grief?" and even "God only knows what'll happen next" – she announced that Nikolai Sergeich had been in such a state these past few days that "there are just no words for it".

"He's simply unrecognizable," she said. "At night he's feverish, he's down on his knees praying in front of the icon when I'm not looking, he raves in his sleep, and when he's awake, he's like one demented. We sat down to a plate of *shchi*[*] yesterday and he couldn't even find his spoon. You ask him one thing and he replies to something quite different. Lately he's been going out nearly every minute – 'On business,' he says, 'I must see my lawyer.' This morning he locked himself in his study – 'I've an important legal document on the lawsuit to write,' he said. I thought to myself, 'What kind of document could you be writing if you can't even find your spoon next to your plate?' All the same I peeped through the keyhole, and there he was writing away, and simply crying his heart out. 'Whoever writes a business document like that?' I thought. 'Or perhaps he's just grieving for our Ikhmenevka, which means we might as well kiss it goodbye!' All this was going through my mind, when suddenly up he jumps, flings his pen on his writing desk, red in the face, eyes glinting, grabs his cap and rushes out. 'I'll be back soon, Anna Andreyevna,' he says. So off he went, and I rushed straight to his desk. There's such a heap of papers on our case there, but he won't let me touch any of them. I've asked him a thousand

times if I've asked him once to let me tidy up, so I could at least dust the table! 'Don't you dare!' he'd shout and wave his arms about – he's become so short-tempered here in St Petersburg, never stops shouting. So I went to his writing desk and started rummaging – where was that paper he was writing just now? Because I knew for a fact he never took it with him, but had stuck it under the others when he was getting up. Well, my dear Ivan Petrovich, this is what I found, look for yourself."

And she handed me a sheet of notepaper half covered in writing, but so blotted that in some places it was impossible to make out the text.

Poor man! From the first lines it was immediately evident what and to whom he had been writing. The letter was to Natasha, his beloved Natasha. He began emotionally and tenderly – he offered her forgiveness and called on her to come back. It was difficult to decipher the whole letter, written in an awkward, cramped hand, with countless corrections. It was clear that the initial fervour, which had compelled him to take up the pen and dash off the first deeply felt lines, had soon transformed itself into something else – Ikhmenev went on to rebuke his daughter, depicting her transgression in vivid colours, indignantly reminding her of her stubbornness, scolding her for her callousness and that she hadn't perhaps even once considered what it was she had inflicted upon her mother and father. He threatened to punish and curse her for her pride, and ended by insisting that she should return home submissively forthwith, and that then, only then, after a compliant and exemplary life "in the family bosom", would they perhaps pardon her. Evidently after a few lines he'd taken his initial magnanimity for a sign of weakness, begun to feel embarrassed and finally, overcome with pangs of wounded pride, concluded on a defiantly threatening note. The good lady stood before me in a state of terror, her hands clasped, waiting to hear what I would say on perusing the letter.

I told her everything openly as I saw it. Namely that Nikolai Sergeich was no longer able to live without Natasha and that it was high time the two came to a reconciliation, but that all the same, everything depended on circumstances. At the same time I explained my surmise that the adverse outcome of the lawsuit had severely affected and upset him – quite apart from the extent to which his own self-esteem had been wounded by the Prince's triumph over him and the indignation that was

engendered in his heart by the way the case had been decided. At such moments a man's soul cannot help but seek sympathy, and he felt ever more strongly drawn towards her whom he had always loved more than anything in the world. Finally, it could also be that he had heard (because he'd been spying on Natasha and knew all about her) that Alyosha was soon to leave her. He could well have been aware of what she had been going through and, judging by what he himself felt, could have known how badly in need of succour she was. All the same, he had been unable to control his emotions, regarding himself as insulted and humiliated by his daughter. It might also have occurred to him that it wasn't she who was bending the knee first, that perhaps she wasn't even giving them a second thought and felt no need for reconciliation. He must have thought along those lines, I concluded, and it was for this reason that he had failed to finish his letter, and maybe fresh embarrassments would flow from all this, which would be perceived even more keenly than the original ones and, who knows, the moment of reconciliation might be put off even further…

The good lady was crying as she listened to me. At last, when I said that I needed to see Natasha urgently and that I was already running late, she started and announced that she'd forgotten *the main thing*. When she was withdrawing the letter from beneath the papers, she had accidentally knocked the inkwell over. True enough, one corner was completely covered in ink, and Anna Andreyevna was terrified that her husband would know by the stain that someone had been going through his papers without his knowledge and that she had read his letter to Natasha. Her fear was quite justified – the very fact that we knew his secret, his embarrassment and frustration, could stoke his anger and cause him to stand on his dignity and refuse to grant his forgiveness.

But on reflection I persuaded the kind old lady not to worry. He had got up from his desk in such a state of agitation that he could well not have noticed all the details, and would no doubt blame himself for having smudged the letter. After I had thus put Anna Andreyevna's mind at rest, we carefully replaced the letter in its original position and, before I left, I decided to talk things over seriously with her about Nelly. It occurred to me that the poor destitute orphan, whose mother too had been cursed by her own father, could move Ikhmenev to magnanimity

with the sad, heart-rending story of her life and her mother's death. In his heart of hearts, he was already reconciled; the longing for his daughter was already gaining over his pride and wounded self-esteem. All that was needed was an impetus, a final favourable opportunity, and this favourable opportunity could well be provided by Nelly. Anna Andreyevna listened to me with rapt attention – her whole face was lit up with hope and excitement. She immediately began to scold me for not having told her this long before. She showered me with anxious questions about Nelly and ended up with a solemn promise that she herself would ask her husband to take the orphan into their house. She had already started to love Nelly genuinely, was truly sorry she was ill, questioned me about her, dashed off to the larder for a jar of preserves, which she forced upon me to take to her, then, thinking I had no money to pay the doctor, brought me five roubles and, when I refused to take it, reluctantly allowed herself to be consoled by the knowledge that Nelly was still in need of clothing and underwear, and that consequently there was still scope for helping her – whereupon she immediately began to turn out her chest of drawers and lay out all her dresses, picking out those which could be spared for "the little orphan girl".

I, however, went to Natasha's. When I was about to negotiate the last flight of the staircase – which, as I have noted before was a spiral one – I caught sight of someone at her door and on the point of knocking, but who, on hearing my steps, checked himself. Finally, after some hesitation, the person changed his mind and began to hurry down. I bumped into him on the last step of the landing, and imagine my surprise when I recognized Ikhmenev. On the stairs it was dark at the best of times. He pressed himself against the wall to let me pass, and I remember the strange glint in his eyes as he looked at me intently. I had the impression he went very red; in any case he seemed very much at a loss and even nonplussed.

"Oh, Vanya, it's you, is it!" he said in an unsteady voice, "I was going to see someone here… a copy clerk… on business, you understand… he's moved recently… hereabouts somewhere… no, he doesn't live here, it seems. My mistake. Goodbye."

And he hurriedly resumed his descent.

For the time being I decided not to mention this meeting to Natasha, but definitely to inform her of it when she'd be on her own, following Alyosha's departure. As things stood, she was so upset that, even though she might have understood and appreciated all the implications of it, she would not have been able to come to terms with it or consider it as fully as she would subsequently at the final moment of overwhelming sorrow and despair. In any case, then was not the time.

That day I might have gone to the Ikhmenevs, and I was sorely tempted to do so, but I did not go. I thought he would feel uncomfortable at the sight of me; he might even have suspected that I had come deliberately as a result of our meeting. I went to them two days later. Ikhmenev was in low spirits, but he met me affably enough and talked of nothing but business matters.

"I say, who was it you were going to see all the way up those flights of steps – you remember we met, when was it now, the day before yesterday, I seem to remember?" he suddenly asked me, rather casually it would seem, but all the same averting his eyes.

"I've a friend who lives there," I replied, also averting my eyes.

"Quite! But I was looking for my copy clerk, by the name of Astafyev. I was told it was that house… I must have made a mistake… Well, as I was saying to you – the court has decided…" and so on, and so forth.

He even went quite red when he touched upon the subject of *the lawsuit*.

I recounted everything to Anna Andreyevna that same day just to cheer the old lady up, incidentally begging her not to give him meaningful glances, not to sigh, not to drop hints, in a word under no circumstances to betray that she knew about this latest venture of his. The old lady was so surprised and pleased that at first she even refused to believe me. For her part, she informed me that she had already been hinting to Nikolai Sergeich about the orphan, but that he hadn't responded, whereas formerly he himself had been begging her to take the girl into the house. We decided she'd confront him with it directly the next day, without any preambles or overtures. But the next day we were both plunged into a terrible state of fear and alarm.

The reason was that in the morning Ikhmenev had met a clerk who was dealing with his case. The clerk informed him that he'd seen the

Prince, and that even though the Prince was going to retain possession of Ikhmenevka, nevertheless, "*due to certain family circumstances*", he had decided to compensate him to the tune of ten thousand roubles. After seeing the clerk Ikhmenev hurried straight over to me in a terrible state of agitation; his eyes glinting with fury. For some reason he brought me out of my room onto the landing and began to insist that I should go to the Prince immediately and inform him that he was challenging him to a duel. I was so shaken that it took me a long time to realize what was happening. I tried to reason with him. But he flew into such a rage that he felt unwell. I dashed back inside for a glass of water, but when I returned, Ikhmenev had gone.

The next day I went to see him but he had already left. He was away for three whole days.

On the third day we learnt everything. From my place he had rushed straight to the Prince's, had not found him at home and had left a note. He wrote that he knew the precise words in which the Prince had couched his intentions to the clerk, which he considered mortally offensive, branded the Prince a despicable scoundrel and, in consequence of everything, challenged him to a duel with the warning that should the Prince dare to evade the challenge, he would disgrace him publicly.

Anna Andreyevna told me that he returned home in such a state of agitation that he took to his bed. He treated her with great consideration, but was reluctant to answer her questions and was clearly expecting something with feverish impatience. The next morning a letter arrived through the post; having read it, he cried out and clutched his head. Anna Andreyevna went numb with fright. But he immediately snatched up his hat and walking stick, and dashed out.

The letter was from the Prince. Curtly, drily and politely he informed Ikhmenev that he need render no account to anyone of his instructions to court officials; that though he felt a great deal of sympathy for Ikhemenev for the loss of his case, he could not, his sympathy notwithstanding, deem it equitable that an unsuccessful plaintiff should be entitled to challenge his opponent to a duel out of revenge. As regards the "public disgrace", that he was threatened with, the Prince begged Ikhmenev to put the notion right out of his head, because there would

be no public disgrace nor could there possibly be any, because the letter would be passed forthwith to the appropriate authorities, and the police, duly apprised, would no doubt take all necessary measures to maintain law and order.

Clutching the letter in his hand, Ikhmenev hurried to confront the Prince. The Prince was out yet again, but from a servant Ikhmenev managed to find out that he was probably at Count N.'s. Without further ado he rushed to the Count's. The Count's footman stopped him when he was already ascending the stairs. Boiling with rage, the old man swung at him with his stick. He was seized immediately, dragged out onto the porch and delivered to some police officers, who conveyed him to the police station. The Count was duly informed. When the Prince, who was in attendance, explained to the old lecher that this was Ikhmenev – the father of that selfsame Natalya Nikolayevna (the Prince had on many an occasion rendered the Count *certain services*) – the old nobleman merely burst out laughing and let clemency temper his rage; an order was issued to discharge Ikhmenev to the four winds, but in the event he was released only two days later. In addition (probably on the Prince's instructions), he was informed that it was the Prince himself who had interceded with the Count on his behalf to show him leniency.

The old man returned home almost demented, fell on his bed and lay there motionless for a whole hour; finally he sat up and, to Anna Andreyevna's horror, solemnly announced that he was cursing his daughter *for ever* and depriving her of his parental blessing.

Anna Andreyevna was aghast, but she had to look after her husband and, herself nearly in a state of collapse, spent the whole of that day and the best part of the night nursing him – applying vinegar poultices and lumps of ice to his head. He fell into a fever and began to rave. When I left them, it was already gone two in the morning. However, later that morning he got up and came to me to take Nelly with him for good. But I have already described the scene between him and Nelly; that scene shattered him completely. On returning home, he took to his bed. All this happened on Good Friday, the day Katya and Natasha were to meet and the day before Alyosha and Katya were due to leave St Petersburg. I was present at that meeting – it took place early in the morning, well before old Ikhmenev's visit to my place and before Nelly had first run away from me.

6

ALYOSHA ARRIVED AN HOUR BEFORE the meeting in order to prime Natasha, whereas I arrived at exactly the same time as Katya's calash drew up outside the gate. Katya was accompanied by the elderly French lady who, after much persuading and hemming and hawing, had finally agreed to come along with her and even to let her go unchaperoned upstairs to Natasha, but only on condition that Alyosha went with her; she herself stayed behind to wait in the calash. Katya beckoned me over and, seated as she was, asked me to call Alyosha down. I found Natasha in tears; Alyosha and she were both crying. On hearing that Katya had already arrived, she got up from her chair, wiped her eyes and stood facing the doorway anxiously. She was dressed all in white that morning. Her dark auburn hair was combed flat and tied in a thick bun at the back. I liked her hair done that way very much. When she saw that I was going to stay with her, she asked me to go and see her visitor in.

"I just couldn't come to see Natasha any earlier," Katya said to me as she mounted the stairs. "I was being spied upon all the time – it was terrible. I spent two weeks trying to persuade Madame Albert till she finally agreed. And you, you, Ivan Petrovich, didn't come to see me even once! I couldn't write to you either, nor did I feel like it, because you can't explain anything in a letter! But I needed to see you so badly… Goodness me, how my heart is beating…"

"The stairs are steep," I replied.

"Well yes… the stairs too… but, what do you think – is Natasha going to be cross with me?"

"No, why should she be?"

"Yes… indeed, why should she? I'll see for myself presently. I shouldn't have asked…"

I supported her under her arm. She had actually gone pale and seemed to be a bundle of nerves. She stopped on the last landing to catch her breath, but glanced at me and went ahead resolutely.

She stopped once more at the door and whispered to me, "I'll just simply walk in and say that I had so much faith in her that I came without any qualms… but, no matter, why am I saying this? I'm sure Natasha is the nicest person imaginable. Wouldn't you say?"

She entered hesitantly, as though guilt-ridden, and looked Natasha full in the face, who immediately smiled at her. Katya then approached her quickly, seized her hands and pressed her rosebud lips to Natasha's. Then, still not having said a word to Natasha, she turned to Alyosha with a serious, almost stern air and asked him to leave us for half an hour.

"Don't be cross, Alyosha," she added, "it's because I've lots of important and serious matters to discuss with Natasha that are not for your ears. Be a darling and go away. But you, Ivan Petrovich, please stay behind. You must hear all we have to say to each other."

"Let's sit down," she said to Natasha after Alyosha had left, "I'll sit like this, facing you. I want to have a look at you first."

She sat down almost opposite Natasha and for a few seconds looked at her intently. Natasha responded with an involuntary smile.

"I've seen your photograph," Katya said. "Alyosha showed it to me."

"Well, is it a good likeness?"

"You are prettier," Katya replied decisively and firmly. "I thought you would be anyway."

"You flatter me. But I was admiring you. How pretty you are!"

"Don't! It's not true!… My dearest Natasha!" she added, placing a trembling hand on Natasha's, and both fell silent, looking deep into each other's eyes. "Listen, my angel," Katya broke the silence, "we have only half an hour together. It was as much as Madame Albert would agree to, and we've so much to talk about… I want to… I must… well I'll just go ahead and ask – do you love Alyosha a lot?"

"Yes, a lot."

"And if so… if you love Alyosha a lot… then… you must have his happiness at heart too…" she added meekly and in a whisper.

"Yes, I do want him to be happy…"

"I'm sure… but the question is this – would I make him happy? Do I have the right to speak like this, seeing as I'm taking him away from you? If you believe, and should we agree that he's more likely to be happy with you, then… then…"

"That has already been settled, my dear Katya, you know very well, it has," Natasha replied softly and bowed her head. It was evident she found it difficult to continue the conversation.

It seemed Katya was prepared for a lengthy discussion as to who was best suited to make Alyosha happy and which one of them would have to give him up. But after Natasha's reply, she immediately realized that everything had been settled long ago and there was nothing more to talk about. Her delectable lips parted slightly, she regarded Natasha with sorrow and dismay, still not letting go of her hand.

"And do you love him very much?" Natasha asked suddenly.

"Yes. And there's another thing I wanted to ask, and I came specifically with that in mind – why precisely do you love him?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," Natasha replied with a note of bitter impatience in her voice.

"Would you say he's clever?" Katya asked.

"No, I just simply love him for what he is."

"Me too. I suppose I feel sorry for him in a way."

"So do I," Natasha replied.

"What's to be done with him now? And I just can't understand how he could abandon you for me!" Katya exclaimed. "I mean, now that I've seen you, I can't understand!"

Natasha did not respond and kept looking at the ground. Katya paused a little and suddenly, getting up from her chair, embraced her in silence. With their arms around each other, both began to cry. Katya sat down on the armrest of Natasha's chair and, without releasing her from her embrace, began to kiss Natasha's hands.

"If you only knew how much I love you!" she said through tears. "Let's be sisters, let's always write to each other… and I shall never stop loving you… I shall love you so much, so much…"

"Did he mention to you our wedding in June?" Natasha asked.

"He did. He said you had agreed. But surely that wasn't serious, it was all just to keep him happy, wasn't it?"

"Of course."

"That's what I thought. I shall love him very much, Natasha, and shall write to you about everything. I think he will soon be my husband – everything's pointing that way. And all the rest of them keep saying so too. My darling Natasha, surely you'll now… go back to your parents, won't you?"

Natasha did not reply, but gave her a big kiss in silence.

"Good luck to you both!" she said.

"And… to you… to you too," she brought out.

At that moment the door opened and Alyosha walked in. He had been unable to stay away the full half hour and, seeing both in each other's arms and crying, he fell to his knees in front of Natasha and Katya, unnerved and distressed.

"Why are you crying?" Natasha asked him. "Because we're parting? It's not going to be for long? You'll be back in June, won't you?"

"And that's when your wedding will be too," Katya hastened to add through tears to console him.

"But I can't, I can't leave you not even for a day, Natasha. I'll die without you… you've no idea how precious you are to me now! Especially now!…"

"Well, this is what you must do then," Natasha said with sudden animation, "the Countess is going to stay a while in Moscow, isn't she?"

"Yes, almost a week," Katya interposed.

"A week! What could be better? You'll see them as far as Moscow tomorrow – that'll only take a day – and then you can come back here immediately. When the time comes for them to depart from Moscow, we shall say our goodbyes for the coming month, and you will return to Moscow to join them."

"That's right, that's right… That way you'll have at least an extra four days together," Katya exclaimed, delighted, as she exchanged a meaningful glance with Natasha.

I can hardly describe Alyosha's exultation on hearing this new proposal. His mind was suddenly put completely at rest; his face glowed

with joy, he clasped Natasha in his arms, kissed Katya's hands and hugged me. Natasha regarded him with a sorrowful smile, but Katya was unable to contain herself. She cast me a fervent, gleaming look, embraced Natasha and rose to leave. Just at that moment Madame Albert sent her manservant with the message that the rendezvous should urgently be brought to a close, since the half-hour agreed upon had already expired.

Natasha rose. They both stood facing each other, holding hands and as though straining to convey in their expressions everything that had accumulated in their hearts.

"You realize we'll never see each other again," Katya said.

"Never, Katya," Natasha replied.

"Well then, let's say goodbye." They embraced.

"Spare a kind thought for me," Katya whispered hurriedly. "And I… always… rest assured… he will be happy… Let's go, see me out, Alyosha!" she said hurriedly, clutching his hand.

"Vanya!" Natasha said, agitated and exhausted, after they had left. "You go after them too and… don't come back. Alyosha will stay with me till evening, till eight o'clock. He won't be able to stay longer and he'll leave. I'll be on my own… Come back about nine. Please!"

When, at nine o'clock, having left Nelly with Alexandra Semyonovna (after the incident with the broken cup), I came to Natasha's, she was already alone and waiting for me anxiously. Mavra brought the samovar in. Natasha poured me some tea, sat down on the sofa and asked me to move up closer to her.

"There, it's all over now," she said, glancing at me intently. I shall never forget that look in her eyes.

"That's the end of our love. Half a year together! But now a lifetime apart," she added, squeezing my hand. Her hand was burning. I tried to persuade her to put something warm on and go to bed.

"I will, Vanya, I will, my dear friend. Let me just talk and reminisce a little… I feel completely shattered now… Tomorrow I'm seeing him for the last time, at ten… *for the very last*!"

"Natasha, you're not well, you'll be shivering soon. Take care of yourself…"

"What was that? I waited for you, Vanya, that half an hour after he left, and what would you say I was thinking about, what was I asking myself? I was asking whether I loved him or not, and what precisely was this love of ours? Do you find it funny, Vanya, that it's only now I should ask myself that?"

"Don't upset yourself, Natasha…"

"You see, Vanya, I realized I didn't love him as an equal, the way a woman usually loves a man. I loved him as a… almost as a mother. It even seems to me there's no such love in this world where both would love each other in equal measure, eh? What do you think?"

I was looking at her anxiously, afraid that she might be developing a brain fever. It was as if she were under some compulsion; she felt some strong urge to speak. Some of her words seemed disjointed, and at times even slurred. I was full of misgivings for her.

"He was mine," she continued. "Almost from the first time we met I had an uncontrollable desire that he should be *mine*, *mine* as soon as possible, and that he should not look at anyone, not associate with anyone except me, only me… Katya put it very well just now – I loved him precisely as though I could never stop feeling sorry for him for some reason… When I was on my own I had an uncontrollable need, bordering on an obsession, for him to be always and for ever deliriously happy. I only have to look at him (you know the expression on his face, Vanya), and I swoon. *No one else* has quite such an expression, and when he laughs, I get a tingling down my spine… Honestly!…"

"Natasha, listen—"

"People say," she interrupted me, "incidentally, you too said it, that he has no character and… and when it comes to it, he's no better than a child. Well, that's precisely what I loved most about him… would you believe it? To be sure, I don't know whether that's the only thing I loved him for. I loved him as he was, and had he been at all different – either in character or in intelligence, perhaps I wouldn't have loved him so. You know, Vanya, I'll let you into a secret. You remember, the two of us had a quarrel three months ago when he went to see that, what was her name, that Minna… I found out about it, I made enquiries and was terribly hurt, but at the same time I rather enjoyed it… I don't know why… the very thought that he too, like a *proper gentleman* in the

company of other such *proper gentlemen*, calls on the ladies of the town, on his Minna! I… You've no idea how delightful that quarrel was for me! And then to forgive him for it… oh my darling!"

She looked me full in the face and laughed – an odd kind of laugh. Then she seemed to fall into a reverie, as though still reminiscing, and spent a good while yet sitting thus with a smile on her lips, turning the past over in her mind.

"I loved forgiving him, Vanya, dreadfully," she continued. "You know, whenever he used to leave me on my own, I used to pace up and down the room, heartbroken, crying my eyes out, but thinking to myself all the same – the guiltier he is before me the better, really… yes! And you know, I always pictured him as a small boy – his head resting in my lap, asleep, and I'd be stroking his head softly, lovingly… I always thought of him that way, whenever he wasn't with me… Listen, Vanya," she added suddenly, "isn't Katya a real darling!"

I had a feeling she was deliberately rubbing salt into her wound out of a compulsion of some kind – a compulsive yearning for despair, for suffering… And so it is often with a heart that has suffered too great a loss!

"Katya, I think, can make him happy," she continued. "She's plucky and talks with such conviction, and when they're together she's so serious, so imposing – never a frivolous word, like a grand lady. But in fact, in actual fact – she's just a child! Sweet, sweet girl! Oh! Let them be happy! Let them, let them, let them!…"

Heartrending sobs shook her whole frame. For the next half-hour she was unable to control herself or calm down in any way.

Dearest angel Natasha! Even that same night, despite her own grief, she was nevertheless able to sympathize with me too when I, hoping to take her mind off things and on seeing that she had calmed down somewhat or rather grown more tired, told her about Nelly… We parted that night very late; I waited till she had fallen asleep and, as I was leaving, asked Mavra to sit up with her sick mistress the whole night.

"Oh, if only these troubles would come to an end soon!" I groaned as I made my way home. "Somehow, anyhow, I just can't wait to see the back of them!"

The next morning at ten sharp I was already back at her place. Alyosha arrived at the same time… to say goodbye. I don't want to dwell on that scene, I don't want to recall it. Natasha appeared determined to put a brave face on it – to appear more cheerful, indifferent – but could not. She clasped her arms around Alyosha tightly, fitfully; not saying much, but fixing him with a long, intense, tortured and somewhat wild stare. She hung eagerly on his every word and apparently did not understand a thing he said. I remember he asked to be forgiven, forgiven for this love and for all the hurtful things he had ever done to her – his infidelities, his love for Katya, his departure… He rambled, tears were choking him. Sometimes he attempted to comfort her, he said he was going away only for a month or five weeks at the most, that he'd be back in summer for their wedding, to which his father would give his consent, and finally, and most importantly, that he'd be back from Moscow the day after next and they'd then have a whole four days all to themselves, and that consequently they were now parting for one day only…

Funnily enough he was quite convinced that he was telling the truth and that he would definitely be back from Moscow the day after next… Why then did he cry so much and take it all so badly?

At last eleven o'clock struck. I barely managed to persuade him to go. The Moscow train departed at twelve sharp. There was only one hour left. Natasha herself told me later that she did not remember how she brought herself to look at him for the last time. I remember she made the sign of the cross over him, kissed him and, burying her face in her hands, rushed back into her room. I had to escort Alyosha all the way to his conveyance, otherwise he would have returned never to come downstairs again.

"All my hopes are on you," he said as we were descending the steps. "Vanya, my friend! I'm guilty before you and I've never been able to deserve your friendship, but be a brother to me to the end – take good care of her, don't abandon her, write to me about everything in as much detail and in as close a hand as possible to fit everything in. I'm back again the day after tomorrow definitely, definitely! But later, after I'm gone, be sure to write!"

I helped him into the droshky.

"Till the day after tomorrow!" he called out to me as he drove off. "Definitely!"

I went back up to Natasha with a sinking heart. She was standing in the middle of the room, her arms folded, and glanced at me in puzzlement, as though without recognition. Her hair had somehow slid to one side; her eyes were vacant and unsteady. Mavra, who looked distraught, was standing in the doorway, gazing at her in alarm.

Suddenly Natasha's eyes flashed.

"Ah! Is that you! You!" she shouted at me. "It's only you that's left now. You hated him! You never could forgive him that I had fallen in love with him… Look at you now back with me again! What do you want? Have you come to *comfort* me again, to persuade me to go back to my father who's abandoned and cursed me? I could tell this yesterday, two months ago!… I don't want to, I don't! I curse them myself!… Get out, I can't bear to look at you! Go on, get out!"

I could see she was beside herself and that the very sight of me made her mad with anger, which was only natural, I realized, and decided to withdraw. I sat down on the top stair outside and – waited. From time to time, I would get up, open the door and call Mavra over to question her; Mavra was crying.

An hour and a half or so passed. I cannot depict what I went through in that time. My heart was convulsing with unimaginable pain. Suddenly the door opened, and Natasha ran out onto the stairs with her cloak and hat on. She seemed hardly aware of what she was doing and afterwards told me herself that she could barely remember it, and had no idea where she was heading or why.

I had no time to jump up and hide before she spotted me and stopped dead in her tracks. "I suddenly realized," she told me subsequently, "that in my insanity and cruelty, I had actually driven you away, you, my friend, my brother and my saviour! And as soon as I saw you, my poor darling, whom I had insulted, sitting on the stairs, waiting for me to call you back again – God! – if only you knew, Vanya, what I went through then! It was like a stab to the heart…"

"Vanya! Vanya!" she cried out, holding out her arms to me. "You're here!…" and she fell in my embrace.

I caught her in my arms and took her into the room. She had fainted. "What's to be done?" I thought. "She's going to have a brain fever, that's certain!"

I decided to run for the doctor; the illness had to be checked. A cab would soon get me there; usually the old German stayed in till two. I hurried to him, begging Mavra not to let Natasha out of her sight even for a minute, and not to allow her to go out. I was lucky. A little later, and I would have missed the old gentleman altogether. I met him in the street as he was leaving the house. In a trice I bundled him into my cab before he had time to express his surprise, and we hurried back to Natasha's.

Yes, fortune favoured me! During the half-hour that I was away, something had happened to Natasha that could have been the death of her, had the doctor and I not arrived in the very nick of time. Not a quarter of an hour after I had left, the Prince turned up. He had just seen his folks off and had come to Natasha's straight from the station. This visit had probably been decided upon and planned by him a long time before. Later Natasha told me that in the initial moments she did not even feel surprised to see him. "I had lost my mind," she said.

The Prince sat down opposite her, looking at her with a tender, compassionate gaze.

"My dear," he said with a sigh, "I can understand your grief. I knew how difficult this moment would be for you, and I therefore made it my duty to visit you. Be comforted, if you can, at least by the knowledge that, in giving up Alyosha, you have secured his happiness. But you understand all this better than I, because you have made a noble sacrifice…"

"I just sat and listened," Natasha told me, "but at first I honestly couldn't quite make out what he was saying. All I remember is just sitting and staring at him. He took my hand and began to press it in his. He seemed to enjoy this very much. As for me, I was so confused that I never even thought of pulling my hand away.

"You realized," he continued, "that, had you become Alyosha's wife, you might have subsequently turned into an object of hatred for him, and you managed to muster sufficient personal pride to recognize this, and resolved to… but – look, I haven't really come here to praise you. I

merely wished to tell you that you'll never find yourself anywhere a truer friend than me. I feel for you and pity you. I played an involuntary part in all this matter, but – I was only doing my duty. Your generous heart will appreciate this and come to terms with mine… And for me it has been harder than for you, believe me!"

"That's enough, Prince," Natasha said. "Leave me in peace."

"Certainly, I shall leave you soon enough," he replied, "but I love you as my daughter, and you must allow me to call on you. Regard me now as your father and let me be of assistance to you.—"

"There's nothing I need. Leave me alone," Natasha interrupted him again.

"I know you are proud… But I'm speaking sincerely, from the heart. What do you intend to do now? Make peace with your parents? That would be a good thing on the face of it, but your father's unjust, arrogant and a despot. Forgive me, but that is so. At home you'd only meet with reproaches and new hardships… However, you must have your independence, and it is my responsibility, my sacred duty to care for you now and to help you. Alyosha implored me not to abandon you and to be your friend. But there are people other than myself who are deeply devoted to you. You will, I hope, allow me to introduce you to Count N. He is truly a kind-hearted person, a kinsman, and one could say a benefactor of the whole of our family. He has done a lot for Alyosha. Alyosha respects him very much and is devoted to him. He is a man who wields a great deal of power and is highly influential, a venerable gentleman, and it would be quite fitting for a young lady like yourself to receive him. I have mentioned you to him already. He could take care of you and, if you wished it, settle you very advantageously… with one of his female relatives. I've already given him an honest and frank account of *our* affair quite some time ago, and he was so carried away by his noble and worthy sentiments that he himself has been trying to persuade me to introduce him to you as soon as possible… He is a man with a keen perception of all that is wonderful, believe me – a generous old gentleman who knows where merit is due and who even quite recently manifested exceptional gallantry in dealing with an indiscretion of your father's."

Natasha sat up as though stung to the quick. She no longer had any illusions about him.

"Leave me, leave me at once!" she shouted.

"But, my dear, you are forgetting – the Count may be of assistance to your father too—"

"My father will accept nothing from you. Will you leave me alone!" Natasha cried out again.

"Heavens, how impetuous and mistrustful of you! Totally unwarranted, I'm sure," the Prince said, looking around somewhat anxiously. "In any case you will allow me," he continued, producing a large envelope from his pocket, "you will permit me to leave you this token of my concern for you, and especially the Count's concern, whose counsel has been my inspiration. This envelope contains ten thousand roubles. Hold on, my dear," he interposed, on seeing that Natasha had risen to her feet furiously, "hear me out patiently – you know your father lost the lawsuit against me, and this ten thousand roubles will serve as a recompense, which—"

"Get out," Natasha cried, "take your money and get out! I can see what you're up to… you despicable, utterly despicable, despicable man!"

The Prince rose from his seat, pale with anger.

He had very likely come in order to sound out the situation, to reconnoitre, and evidently set great store by the effect this ten thousand roubles would have on the impoverished and utterly forlorn Natasha… Base and vulgar, he had more than once rendered the lascivious old Count favours of this kind. But he also detested Natasha and, realizing that his move had gone awry, he immediately changed tack and with malicious glee hastened to insult Natasha, so as *at least to have something to show for his troubles*.

"Well now, it is highly unfortunate, my dear, that you are so impetuous," he said with a slight tremor in his voice occasioned by the impatient longing to savour as soon as possible the effect of his insult, "this really is unfortunate. I am offering you protection, and all you can do is turn your little nose up… Whereas it would have behoved you to be grateful to me. As the father of a young man whom you've been

corrupting and fleecing, I could have put you in a penitentiary long ago, but I have not, have I?… Hehehe!"

But by then we were already on our way up. Hearing voices as we passed through the kitchen, I stopped the doctor for a second and just caught the Prince's last words. Then came his revolting chuckle, followed by Natasha's cry of desperation, "Oh my God!" At the same moment I threw the door open and pounced upon the Prince.

I spat in his face and slapped it with all my strength. He was about to retaliate but, seeing that there were two of us, took to his heels, first snatching the envelope with the money from the table. Yes, he did that; I saw it myself. I threw a rolling pin after him which I had picked up from the kitchen table… When I returned to the room, I saw the doctor trying to hold down Natasha, who was lashing out and struggling in his arms as in a fit. It took us a long time to calm her down. Finally we managed to put her to bed; she was in a state of nervous delirium.

"Doctor! What's the matter with her?" I asked, numb with fear.

"Wait," he replied, "we must first observe the symptoms and then reach a conclusion… but, to tell the truth, things do not look good. It can even end in brain fever… However, we shall take measures…"

But I already had a new idea. I persuaded the doctor to stay with Natasha another two or three hours and extracted a promise from him not to leave her even for a minute. He gave me his word, and I rushed home.

Nelly was sitting in a corner, cheerless and agitated, and casting strange glances at me. I must have looked strange myself.

I picked her up in my arms, sat down on the settee, put her on my knees and gave her a warm kiss. She flushed.

"Nelly, my angel!" I said. "Do you want to come to our rescue? Do you want to save us all?"

She looked at me in consternation.

"Nelly! All hope is now on you! There is a father – you've seen him and you know him. He cursed his daughter and came yesterday to ask you to take his daughter's place. Now Natasha (and you did say you loved her!) has been deserted by the one man whom she loved and for whose sake she left her father. He is the son of that Prince, remember, who came here one evening and found you on your own, and you ran

away from him and were ill afterwards… You know him, don't you? He is an evil man!"

"I know," Nelly replied with a shudder and went pale.

"Yes, he is evil. He hates Natasha because his son, Alyosha, wanted to marry her. Today Alyosha went away, and an hour later his father was already at her place, where he insulted her, threatened to put her in a penitentiary and mocked her. Do you understand me, Nelly?"

Her dark eyes flashed, but she lowered them at once.

"I understand," she whispered barely audibly.

"Now Natasha is on her own, and ill. I left her with our doctor and hurried to see you. Listen, Nelly, let's go to Natasha's father. You don't like him, you didn't want to go to him, but now let's go together. We shall go in and I'll say that you want to be with them and take the place of their daughter, take the place of Natasha. Her father is ill now, because he has cursed Natasha and because Alyosha's father insulted him mortally the other day. He won't even hear anything about his daughter now, but he loves her, he does, Nelly, and he wants to be friends with her. I know it, I know everything! That is so!… Do you hear me, Nelly?"

"Yes," she said in the same whisper. I spoke to her with tears in my eyes. She kept casting me timid glances.

"Do you believe me?

"I do."

"Well then, I'll go with you. I'll take you to them, they'll make you welcome and will start asking questions. Then I'll steer the conversation in such a way that they'll ask you how you lived before, they'll ask you about your mother and about your granddad. Tell them, Nelly, everything the way you told it to me. Keep it simple but don't hold anything back. Tell them how an evil man deserted your mother and how your mother lay dying in Bubnova's basement, how you and your mother walked the streets begging, what she said to you and what she asked of you when she was dying… Tell them about your granddad too. Tell them, how he wouldn't forgive your mother, and how she sent you to him just before she died that he should come and forgive her, and that he wouldn't… and that she died. Tell them everything, absolutely everything! And at the end of your story, her father will search his own

heart. He knows that Alyosha has deserted her today and that she's now been left shamed and dishonoured, all alone, with no one to help her or protect her from the insults of her enemy. He knows all this… Nelly! Save Natasha! Will you come?"

"Yes," she replied, drawing a deep and painful breath as she cast me a strange, long and probing look; there was something akin to reproach in it, and I felt it in my heart.

But I could not relinquish my idea. I had too much faith in it. I grabbed Nelly by the arm, and we left. It was gone two o'clock in the afternoon. Clouds were gathering. For some time past the weather had been hot and sultry, but now there came from somewhere the distant rumble of early spring thunder. A gust of wind swept through the dust-laden streets.

We took a cab. Nelly was silent all the way, only occasionally casting me that same strange and mysterious look. Her chest was heaving, and as I held her to support her in the droshky, I could feel her little heart thumping against the palm of my hand as though it would break free.

7

THE ROAD SEEMED TO ME INTERMINABLE. At last we arrived, and I entered the old couple's house with a troubled heart. I had no idea how I would leave their house, but I knew that come what may it would have to be on terms of peace and reconciliation.

It was already after three. The Ikhmenevs were on their own as usual. Nikolai Sergeich was very upset and ill, reclining in his comfortable armchair, pale and exhausted, with a kerchief tied round his head. Anna Andreyevna was sitting beside him, from time to time dabbing his temples with vinegar and ceaselessly peering into his face with a prying woeful mien, which he evidently found irritating and even distressing. He maintained a stubborn silence, and she dared not speak. Our sudden arrival astonished them both. On seeing that I had Nelly with me, Anna Andreyevna panicked for some reason and for the first few minutes regarded us with what seemed a guilty air.

"Here, I've brought you my Nelly," I said on entering. "She's thought things over and now wants to be with you. Make her welcome and give her your love…"

Ikhmenev glanced at me suspiciously, and just by that look I could tell that he knew everything, that is, that Natasha was now on her own, abandoned, rejected and no doubt feeling insulted. He was dying to guess the reason behind our visit, and looked quizzically at Nelly and myself. Nelly was shaking all over, tightly clenching my hand as she stared at the ground, only occasionally casting frightened glances around the room like a trapped little animal. But Anna Andreyevna soon recovered her wits and sized up the situation. She rushed towards

Nelly, embraced her, kissed her, stroked her affectionately and even shed a tear as she lovingly seated her beside her without letting go of her hand. Nelly measured her with a curious, sidelong, somewhat astonished glance.

But, having comforted Nelly, now that they were sitting side by side, Anna Andreyevna did not know what to do next, and began to look at me in naive expectation. Ikhmenev winced; perhaps he thought he knew why I had brought Nelly along. On seeing that I was beginning to draw conclusions from his sour mien and wrinkled brow, he brought his hand up to his head and said, falteringly, "Headache, Vanya."

We all sat in silence; I was casting around for something to say. It was dusky in the room; a black cloud was gathering outside, and again there was a distant rumble of thunder.

"Thunderstorms are early this spring," Ikhmenev said. "But in eighteen-thirty-seven, I remember, there was one even earlier in our parts."

Anna Andreyevna sighed.

"Shall we have the samovar in?" she asked diffidently, but no one responded, and she again turned to Nelly.

"What do they call you, my dearest?" she asked her.

Nelly mumbled her name and dropped her head even lower. Ikhmenev looked at her.

"That's short for Yelena, isn't it?" Anna Andreyevna continued, becoming more animated.

"Yes," Nelly replied, and another minute's silence followed.

"Praskovya Ivanovna's sister had a niece, Yelena," Nikolai Sergeich said, "she too was called Nelly, I remember."

"Haven't you got any parents, my pet, a father, or mother?" Anna Andreyevna asked again.

"No, I haven't," Nelly replied in a halting, nervous whisper.

"So I heard, so I heard. And has your mother been dead long?"

"No."

"My dearest poppet, my little orphan," the good lady continued, looking at her pityingly. Nikolai Sergeich drummed on the tabletop with his fingers in exasperation.

"So your mother was from foreign parts, was she? That's what you told me, Ivan Petrovich, wasn't it?" Anna Andreyevna persisted tentatively.

Nelly fleetingly looked at me with her dark eyes as though appealing for help. Her breathing seemed to be laboured and uneven.

"Her mother, Anna Andreyevna," I began, "had an English father and a Russian mother, so she was more Russian than English. Nelly, however, was born abroad."

"Why then did her mother go to live abroad with her husband?"

Nelly suddenly flushed with anger. Anna Andreyevna realized immediately she had said the wrong thing, and blanched under her husband's furious glance. He darted her a disapproving look and then turned towards the window.

"Her mother was led astray by a worthless scoundrel," he said suddenly, addressing Anna Andreyevna. "She ran away from her father with him and entrusted her father's money to her lover, who took it from her on false pretences, travelled abroad with her, fleeced her and left her destitute. There was one kind-hearted person who didn't desert her but helped her till the day he died. After his death two years ago, she returned to her father. That's what you told me anyway, Vanya, wasn't it?" he asked haltingly.

Nelly got up in utter distress and headed for the door.

"Come here, Nelly," Ikhmenev said, putting out his hand to her at last. "Sit here, sit next to me, that's right – sit!" He leant over, kissed her on the forehead and began to stroke her head gently. Nelly simply quaked all over… but she took a grip on herself. Anna Andreyevna, elated by hope, looked on with delight as her Nikolai Sergeich appeared to have befriended the little orphan girl.

"I know, Nelly, that your mother was ruined by an evil man, evil and unscrupulous, but I also know that she loved her father and respected him," Ikhmenev said, his voice filled with emotion as he continued to stroke Nelly's head, unable to resist throwing down this challenge to us. A light colour rose to his pale cheeks; he made every effort to avoid looking at us.

"Mummy loved Granddad more than Granddad loved her," Nelly said demurely but firmly, also trying not to look at anyone.

"And how do you know that?" Ikhmenev asked sharply, unable to suppress his eagerness like a child, and evidently embarrassed at his own lack of restraint.

"I know," Nelly replied haltingly. "He wouldn't see Mummy and… turned her away…"

I could see Nikolai Sergeich wanted to say something, to object, to say for instance that the old man had a good reason not to welcome his daughter, but he glanced at us and said nothing.

"So how then did you manage, where did you stay after your granddad turned you away?" Anna Andreyevna asked, suddenly determined and eager to pursue this of all themes.

"When we arrived in Russia, we spent a long time looking for Granddad," Nelly replied, "but we couldn't find him at all. That's when my mother told me that Granddad had been very rich before and wanted to build a factory, but that he was very poor now, because the man Mummy went away with took from her all the money that belonged to Granddad and wouldn't give it back. She told me that herself."

"Hm…" Ikhmenev responded.

"And another thing she told me," Nelly continued, growing more and more excited, seemingly wishing to respond to Nikolai Sergeich, but addressing Anna Andreyevna instead, "she told me Granddad was very angry with her and she herself was to blame for everything, and that she had no one in the whole world except Granddad. And while she was saying this, she was crying… 'He won't ever forgive me,' she said this when we were making our way back here, 'but perhaps when he sees you, he'll love you and forgive me for your sake.' Mummy loved me a lot and she always kissed me when she told me that, but she was afraid to go to Granddad herself. But she taught me to pray for Granddad, and she prayed herself and told me lots of stories about how she used to live with Granddad and how Granddad loved her more than anyone. She used to play the piano to him and read books in the evening, and Granddad kissed her and used to give her lots of presents… all sorts, so that once they had a row on Mummy's name day, because Granddad thought Mummy didn't know what her present was going to be, but Mummy had found out ages before. Mummy wanted a pair of earrings,

but Granddad kept lying to her deliberately and said he'd give her a broach and not earrings. And when he brought her earrings and realized Mummy knew already that it would be earrings, and not a brooch, he lost his temper because Mummy knew it already, and wouldn't talk to her for half a day, and then came to her himself to kiss her and ask forgiveness…"

Nelly spoke with fervour, and even her pale, wan cheeks flushed with colour.

It was clear her mother had often spoken to her little Nelly about her former happy days as she sat in the corner of her basement, hugging and kissing her daughter, her only joy in life, and crying over her, and all the while not even for a moment imagining what a powerful impression these stories would subsequently make on the sick child's morbidly susceptible and precocious mind.

But after being carried away by her own story, Nelly suddenly seemed to check herself, looked around in mistrust and fell silent. Ikhmenev furrowed his brow and again began to beat a tattoo on the tabletop; Anna Andreyevna dabbed a tear that had welled up in her eye with her handkerchief.

"Mummy was very sick when she arrived here," Nelly added softly, "she had bad pains in her chest. We looked a long time for Granddad and couldn't find him, and we were renting a corner in a basement then."

"A sick person in a basement!" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed.

"Yes… in a basement…" Nelly replied. "Mummy was poor. Mummy told me," she added, becoming more animated, "there's nothing wrong in being poor, but it is wrong to be rich and to hurt people… and that it was God punishing her."

"Was it on Vasìlevsky Island you lodged? Over at Bubnova's, was it?" Ikhmenev asked, turning to me and trying to inject a note of casualness into his tone. He spoke because he felt awkward just to sit and say nothing.

"No, not there… on the Meshchanskaya Street at first," Nelly replied. "It was very dark and damp there," she continued after a pause, "and Mummy was very sick, but she could still walk then. I laundered for her, but she kept crying. There was also an old lady, a captain's widow,

and a retired clerk, who always came home drunk and shouted and made a lot of noise every night. I was very frightened of him. Mummy used to take me into her bed and hug me, but she was shivering all over, I remember, and the clerk kept shouting and swearing all the time. Once he tried to beat the captain's widow, who was old and walked with a stick. Mummy was sorry for her and she stood up for her. The clerk hit Mummy, and I hit the clerk…"

Nelly stopped. Her reminiscences upset her; her eyes glistened.

"Good Heavens!" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed, entirely immersed in the story, her eyes riveted on Nelly, who had been mainly addressing her.

"Once Mummy went out," Nelly continued, "and took me with her. It was daytime. We walked the streets till evening, and Mummy just kept walking and crying, and she led me by the hand. I was very tired. We hadn't eaten anything that day. And Mummy was talking to herself all the time and saying to me, 'Stay poor, Nelly, and after I'm dead, don't listen to anyone or anything. Don't go to anyone. Stay on your own, stay poor and work, and if you can't get a job, go and beg, but *don't go to them*. We were just crossing a wide street at dusk when Mummy suddenly cried out, 'Azorka! Azorka!' And suddenly a large mangy dog ran up to Mummy, yelped and jumped all over her, but Mummy was frightened, she turned pale, cried out and fell on her knees in front of a tall old man who was walking with a stick and looking at the ground. And that tall man was Granddad, very thin and in such horrible clothes. That was when I saw Granddad for the first time. Granddad was very frightened too and went all pale, and when he saw Mummy lying on the ground with her arms round his feet – he broke free, pushed Mummy aside, struck the pavement with his stick and stalked off quickly. Azorka stayed behind, whining and licking Mummy, then ran back to Granddad, sank his teeth in his coat tail and tugged at it, but Granddad hit him with his stick. Then Azorka ran back to us, but Granddad called out and the dog ran after him, whining all the time. But Mummy was lying senseless on the ground, people gathered round, the police came. I was crying all the time, trying to get Mummy to stand up, and when she did, she looked around and

followed me. I took her home. People were staring at us and shaking their heads…"

Nelly paused to draw breath and to summon her strength. She was very pale, but resoluteness glinted in her eyes. Clearly, she was at last determined to tell *everything*. There was even something defiant in her at that instant.

"Well," Nikolai Sergeich observed in an unsteady voice, "well, your mother offended her father, and he justifiably rejected her—"

"That's what Mummy said too," Nelly resumed sharply, "and as we walked home, she kept repeating, 'That was your granddad, Nelly, I have wronged him, and he has cursed me for it which is why God is punishing me now,' and she kept repeating this all evening and every day after that. And when she spoke, her mind seemed to be miles away…"

Ikhmenev stayed silent.

"And later, how did you move lodgings then?" Anna Andreyevna asked, continuing to cry quietly.

"Mummy fell ill that same night, and the captain's widow found us a place at Bubnova's, and two days later we moved, and the captain's widow came with us too. And after we had moved, Mummy went to bed and didn't get up for the next three weeks, and I looked after her. All our money had run out, but the captain's widow and Ivan Alexandrych helped us."

"The coffin-maker, their landlord," I explained.

"And after Mummy left her bed and started to walk about, she told me about Azorka."

Nelly paused. Ikhmenev perked up once the conversation changed to Azorka.

"So what did she tell you about Azorka?" he asked, sinking even deeper into his armchair, determined to hide his face and stare at the ground.

"She kept talking about Granddad," Nelly replied, "she kept talking about him even when she was sick, and when she was raving she kept talking about him. So when she started getting better, she again began to talk about the way she had lived before… that's when she told me about Azorka, because one day some boys in the country were pulling

Azorka by a rope round his neck to drown him in the river, and Mummy gave them some money and bought Azorka from them. Granddad saw Azorka and began to jeer at him. Azorka ran away. Mummy began to cry. Granddad got frightened and said he'd give a hundred roubles to whoever brought Azorka back. Someone brought the dog three days later. Granddad gave them the hundred roubles and from then on grew very fond of Azorka. And Mummy too loved him so much she used to take him to bed with her. She told me that Azorka had been with street actors before, could beg, carry a monkey on his back, present arms and many other things… But after Mummy left Granddad, he kept Azorka and walked with him everywhere, so that as soon as Mummy saw Azorka on the street, she knew Granddad had to be close by…"

Evidently this was not what Ikhmenev had expected to hear about Azorka, and his face was getting more and more crabbed. He no longer asked any more questions.

"So you didn't see your granddad any more after that, did you?" Anna Andreyevna asked.

"Yes I did, after Mummy started getting better I met Granddad again. I used to go to the shop for some bread – suddenly I saw a man with Azorka, I looked and recognized Granddad. I stepped back and pressed myself against a wall. Granddad looked at me, ever so long, and he was so scary that I was really frightened, and he walked past. But Azorka remembered me and began to leap up and down and lick my hands. I hurried home, looked back and he walked into the shop. I thought to myself he was probably asking questions and I got even more frightened, and when I got back home, I never told Mummy anything, so as not to make her ill again. I didn't go to the shop the next day. I said I had a headache, and when I went the day after, I didn't meet anyone and was ever so scared and ran all the way. But a day later I was walking along and, just as I turned the corner, there was Granddad in front of me, and so was Azorka. I ran and turned into another street to enter the shop from the opposite direction – only I bumped straight into him again and was so frightened I stopped and couldn't go any further. Granddad stood in front of me and again looked at me a long time, then stroked my head, took my hand and we started walking together with Azorka following us and wagging his tail. That was when I noticed

Granddad could hardly walk and kept leaning on his stick, his hands shaking and everything. He took me to a pedlar who was sitting on the street corner selling gingerbread and apples. Granddad bought me a gingerbread cockerel and a fish and one little sweet and an apple, and when he was taking his money out of his leather purse, his hands were really shaking and he dropped a five-kopeck piece, but I picked it up for him. He let me keep it and gave me the gingerbread, stroked me on the head, but again didn't say anything and just walked off.

"Then I went back to Mummy and told her everything about Granddad, and that I was scared of him at first and didn't want him to see me. Mummy wouldn't believe me at first, but then she became so happy she asked me questions the whole evening, kissed me and cried, and after I told her everything, she said I should never be afraid of Granddad and that it was clear he loved me if he came specially to see me. And she told me to be nice to Granddad and to talk to him. Next day she sent me out several times in the morning, even though I told her that Granddad never came except towards evening time. She herself followed me at a distance and was hiding behind corners, and she did that the next day too, but Granddad never came, and it rained every day then and Mummy caught a bad cold, because she always came with me past the house gate, and she took to her bed again.

"But Granddad came a week later and again bought me one little gingerbread fish and an apple and still didn't say anything. But when he walked off, I followed him on the sly, because I'd decided earlier I was going to find out where he lived and tell Mummy. I walked at a distance on the other side of the street so that Granddad wouldn't see me. He lived a long way away, not where he lived afterwards and died, but in Gorokhovaya Street, also in a large house, on the third floor. I found out all this and got back home late. Mummy was very frightened, because she didn't know where I'd been. But after I told her, she was very happy again and wanted to go to him the very next day. But the next day she started thinking about it and got frightened and she kept being frightened three days in a row, and in the end didn't go at all. And after that she called me over and said, 'It's like this, Nelly, I'm ill now and can't go, but I've written your granddad a letter, go and give it to

him. And after he's read it, be sure, Nelly, you note what he says and does, and you go down on your knees, kiss him, and ask him to forgive your mother…' And Mummy was crying a lot, and kissing me all the time, and making the sign of the cross over me to speed me on my way and praying to God, and she made me kneel in front of the icon with her and, even though she was sick, she came to the gate to see me off, and when I looked back, I could see her watching me as I went on my way…

"I came to Granddad's and opened the door, which didn't have a latch. Granddad was sitting at the table, eating bread and potatoes, but Azorka stood next to him, watching him eat and wagging his tail. In that room too the windows were low and dark, and there was only one table and a chair. He lived on his own. I walked in, and he was so frightened he went pale and began to shake. I also got frightened and didn't say a thing. I just walked up to the table and put the letter down. As soon as Granddad saw the letter, he got so angry, he jumped to his feet, grabbed his stick and threatened me with it, but didn't hit me, he only took me out into the passage and gave me a push. I hadn't reached the bottom of the first flight when he opened the door again and threw the letter after me, unopened. I went back home and told Mummy all about it. That's when she took to her bed again…"

8

AT THAT INSTANT A FAIRLY LOUD CLAP of thunder resounded, and torrential rain began to beat heavily against the window panes; it went dark in the room. The good lady started and crossed herself. We all suddenly froze.

"It'll soon blow over," Ikhmenev said, glancing through the windows; then he got up and strode up and down the room. Nelly was following him out of the corner of her eye. She was in an extraordinary, feverish state. I could see it, but somehow she avoided looking at me.

"Well, what happened then?" he enquired, returning to his armchair.

Nelly cast a frightened look around the room.

"So you never saw your granddad again after that?"

"Yes, I did—"

"Go on, go on then! Don't stop, my poppet, carry on," Anna Andreyevna intervened.

"I didn't see him for three weeks," Nelly began, "not until it was already winter. Then winter came and it snowed. When I met Granddad at the usual place again, I was very glad… because Mummy was upset that he had stopped coming. When I saw him, I ran across the street on purpose for him to see that I was running away from him. But as soon as I looked back, I saw that at first he started walking quickly after me, and then he ran to catch up, and he was calling out, 'Nelly, Nelly!' And Azorka was following him. I felt sorry for him and stopped. Granddad came up, took my hand and we started walking, but when he saw I was crying, he bent down and kissed me. That's when he saw that my shoes were full of holes and he asked if I didn't have another pair. I told him

straight away that Mummy had no money at all and that the people in the house gave us some food only because they felt sorry for us. Granddad didn't say anything, but took me to the market and bought me some shoes and told me to put them on straight away, and then he took me back to his place on Gorokhovaya Street, but first he went into a shop and bought me a pie and a couple of sweets, and when we got back, he said I should eat the pie and he watched me eating it, and then he gave me the sweets. But Azorka put his paws on the table and also begged for some pie, so I gave him a piece and Granddad began to laugh. Then he made me stand in front of him and began to stroke my head, and asked if I attended school and what I knew. I told him, and he made me promise to come to him if I could every day at three o'clock, and he'd teach me himself. Then he told me to turn away and look out of the window until he told me to turn round again. I stood like I was told, but turned round without him noticing and saw him unpick the bottom corner of his pillow and take out four roubles. After he had taken them out, he came up to me and said, 'This is just for you.' I was going to take them, but then thought about it and said, 'If it's just for me, I won't take them.' Granddad suddenly got angry and said to me, 'Well then, do what you want with them. Be off!' I left, and he never kissed me.

"When I came home, I told Mummy everything. But Mummy was getting worse and worse. There was a medical student who used to come to the coffin-maker's. He looked after Mummy and made her take medicine.

"But I went to see Granddad a lot – Mummy made me. Granddad bought a New Testament and a geography book and began to teach me. And sometimes he used to tell me what countries there are in the world, and about the people that live there, and all the seas, and what it was like before, and how Christ had forgiven us all. When I asked him questions, he was very pleased. That's why I started asking him a lot, and he always used to tell me things, and also a lot about God. And sometimes we didn't have any lessons, but played with Azorka. Azorka got very friendly with me, and I taught him to jump over a stick and Granddad laughed and patted me on the head. Only Granddad didn't really laugh much. Sometimes he'd talk a lot, but all of a sudden he'd

stop and just sit there, as if asleep, his eyes wide open. It'd be dark and he would still be sitting there, and when it got really dark he looked so dreadful, so old… Some other times I'd go to him, and he'd be sitting in his chair, thinking and not hearing anything, with Azorka lying by him. I'd wait and wait, and then I'd cough. Granddad still wouldn't turn round to look. I'd just leave then. Mummy would always be waiting eagerly for me at home – she'd be lying there and I'd be telling her everything, everything, and so night would come, and me still talking about Granddad all the time – what he'd been doing that day, what stories he'd told me and what homework he'd set me – and her listening. And every time I started talking about Azorka, how I'd made him jump over a stick and how Granddad had laughed, she'd suddenly begin to laugh too and not stop for a long time, and would carry on laughing happily and would ask me to repeat everything all over again, and then she'd start praying. And I'd think – why was it Mummy loved Granddad so much, but he didn't love her? And one day I went to Granddad's and I started telling him on purpose how much Mummy loved him. He kept listening, all cross and everything, but just listened and wouldn't say a word. Then I asked him, why was it Mummy loved him so much and never stopped asking after him, but he never asked after Mummy? Granddad got angry and turned me out of the room. I stood outside the door a while, and suddenly he opened it again and called me in, still very angry and not saying a word. But later, when we started reading the Bible, I asked him again, why was it Jesus Christ had said, 'Love and forgive one another,' but he didn't want to forgive Mummy? Then he jumped up and cried that it was Mummy who had taught me to say that, and pushed me out of the room a second time and said I should never dare to come to him again. And I said I wouldn't anyway, and I left him… But the next day Granddad had already moved…"

"Didn't I say the rain would soon stop!" Nikolai Sergeich said, turning to face the window. "And so it has, and the sun's come out too… look, Vanya!"

Anna Andreyevna looked at him in extreme puzzlement, and suddenly indignation glinted in the eyes of the hitherto indulgent, timorous old

lady. Without a word, she took Nelly by the hand and seated her on her knee.

"Go on, my angel," she said, "I'm listening to you. Let those who are hard of heart…"

She didn't finish but burst out crying. Nelly shot me a puzzled look, as though perplexed and frightened. Ikhmenev glanced at me, shrugged his shoulders awkwardly, but turned away immediately.

"Go on, Nelly," I said.

"I didn't go to Granddad's for three days," Nelly commenced again. "At that time Mummy started feeling worse. All our money had run out, and we had nothing to buy her medicine with, and we didn't eat anything either, nor did our landlords have anything to spare, and they started saying we were sponging off them. Then on the morning of the third day I got up and started dressing. Mummy asked me where was I going. I said to Granddad's to ask for money, and she was pleased, because I'd already told her everything, that he'd thrown me out, and because I'd also told her before that I didn't want to go back to him even though she had cried and begged me to. I went and found out that Granddad had moved, and I went to look for him in the new house. As soon as I entered his new lodgings, he jumped to his feet, came at me fuming and raging, and I told him straight away that Mummy was very sick, that we needed fifty kopecks for her medicine, and we had nothing to eat. Granddad began to shout and pushed me out on the stairs and put the door on the latch behind me. But when he was pushing me out, I said I'd be sitting on the stairs and wouldn't go away till he gave me some money. And I did too. A little later he opened the door and saw me sitting there, and he shut it again. Then a long time went by, he opened the door again, saw I was still there and shut it again. And he kept opening the door many more times to look. At last he came out with Azorka, locked the door and walked past me and out across the yard without so much as saying a word. I didn't say anything either and stayed there till it got dark."

"You poor thing," Anna Andreyevna exclaimed, "it must have been ever so cold for you on the stairs!"

"I had my fur coat," Nelly replied.

"Fur coat, she says!… You little, poppet, how you must have suffered! So what about that Granddad of yours?"

Nelly's lips were about to start quivering, but she made an extraordinary effort and pulled herself together.

"He came back after it was really dark, and as he walked past he bumped into me and cried out, 'Who's here?' I said it was me. He probably thought I'd left long ago, and when he realized I was still there, he was very surprised and just stood there facing me. Suddenly he struck the stairs with his stick, hurried off, opened his door and a minute later brought me some copper coins, all five-kopeck pieces that he threw on the stairs for me. 'There you are,' he shouted, 'take this money, that's all I've got, and tell your mother I curse her!' and he slammed the door shut. The coins rolled down the steps. I started picking them up in the dark, and Granddad, probably realizing he had scattered the coins and it would be difficult for me to find them in the dark, opened the door and brought out a candle, and by candlelight I soon gathered them up. And Granddad himself helped me, and he told me there should be seventy kopecks altogether, and then he went away. When I came home, I gave Mummy the money and told her everything, and Mummy began to feel worse, and I myself was sick all night, and the next day I was hot with fever, but I was thinking of one thing only. I was so angry with Granddad, and when Mummy fell asleep, I went out to go to Granddad's lodgings, but just before I got there, I stopped on a bridge, and just then *that one* walked past…"

"She means Arkhipov," I said, "the fellow I told you about, Nikolai Sergeich, who was at Bubnova's with the young merchant, where he came in for a drubbing. That was the first time Nelly met him… Go on, Nelly."

"I stopped him and asked him for some money, a rouble in silver. He looked at me and said, 'A rouble in silver?' I said, 'Yes.' Then he laughed and said, 'Come with me.' I didn't know if I should. Suddenly an old gentleman in gold-rimmed spectacles came up – he heard me ask for the money. He leant over to me and asked why I needed precisely that amount. I told him my mummy was sick and that we needed that much for her medicine. He asked me where we lived, wrote it down and he gave me a rouble note. And when *the other one* saw the gentleman in

the spectacles, he stalked off and didn't ask me to go with him any more. I went to a shop and changed the rouble into copper coins. I wrapped thirty kopecks in a piece of paper for Mummy, but the other seventy I didn't wrap up, but held in my hand on purpose and went to Granddad's. When I came to his place, I opened the door, stood in the doorway and threw all the money at him as hard as I could so that it rolled all over the floor.

"'There, take your money!' I said to him. 'Mummy doesn't need it from you, because you have cursed her.' I slammed the door and ran away quickly."

Her eyes flashed, and she threw Ikhmenev a naively defiant glance.

"Well done," Anna Andreyevna said, not looking at her husband and hugging Nelly tightly, "serves him right. Your granddad was a bad, hard-hearted—"

"Hm!" Nikolai Sergeich responded.

"So what next, what next?" Anna Andreyevna asked with impatience.

"I stopped going to Granddad's and he stopped coming to see me," Nelly replied.

"Well, how did the two of you, Mummy and yourself, manage then? Oh, you poor, poor things!"

"Mummy got much worse, and she hardly got up from her bed any more," Nelly continued, and her voice shook and broke. "All our money had run out, and I started going around with the captain's widow. The captain's widow used to go from house to house, but she also stopped well-dressed people in the street and begged, that's how she survived. She used to say to me she was no pauper, but had papers to prove her rank and where it said she was poor. She used to show people these papers, and she got money for it. It was she who told me there's nothing shameful in begging off everybody. And so I walked with her and people gave us money, and that's how we got by. Mummy found out about this, because the other lodgers started complaining that she was a pauper, and Bubnova came to Mummy and said she'd better let me go to her rather than be a street beggar. She'd been to see Mummy before to offer her money. And when Mummy wouldn't take it, Bubnova used to ask why we should be so proud, and she used to send us food. But when she said this about me, Mummy began to cry with

fright, but Bubnova started calling her names, because she was drunk, and said I was a pauper girl anyway, going around with the captain's widow, and she turned the widow out of the house the same day. When Mummy found out about everything, she began to cry, then she suddenly got out of bed, dressed, grabbed me by the hand and made me follow her. Ivan Alexandrych tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen, and we went out. Mummy could hardly walk and had to sit down in the street every few minutes, and I kept supporting her. Mummy said she was going to see Granddad and that I should take her to him, and it was already late in the night. Suddenly we came out into a big street. There were lots of carriages stopping in front of one house with lots of people coming out, and there were lights in all the windows, and you could hear music playing. Mummy stopped, grabbed me and said to me then, 'Nelly, be poor, be poor all your life, don't you go to *them*, whoever might ask you to or come to take you. You could have been there too, rich and in a fine dress, but I don't want it. They're evil and cruel, and here's what I'm going to say to you – stay poor, keep working and beg for alms, and if anyone comes to take you, just say, "I don't want to go with you!"' That's what Mummy said I should do when she was ill, and I want to do as she told me all my life," Nelly added, shaking with emotion, her cheeks flushed, "and I shall serve and work all life long, and that's why I came here too to serve and to work, and I don't want to be your daughter…"

"Hush, hush, my poppet, hush!" the good lady exclaimed, giving Nelly a big hug. "You mustn't forget, your mummy was ill when she said that."

"You mean out of her mind," Ikhmenev observed harshly.

"Even if she was!" Nelly interjected, turning on him sharply. "Even if she was out of her mind, that's what she told me to do and I'll do it all my life. And when she told me, she even fainted."

"Good God!" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed. "On the street, in her condition, in winter?…"

"They wanted to take us to the police station, but there was this gentleman who came and asked me where we lived. He gave me ten roubles and took us back home in his carriage. After that Mummy never got up, and three weeks later she died…"

"And what about her father? Did he never forgive her?" Anna Andreyevna cried out.

"No, he didn't!" Nelly replied, desperately trying to control herself. "A week before she died, Mummy called me and said, "Nelly, go and see Granddad once more, for the last time, and ask him to come and forgive me. Tell him I'm going to die in a few days and will leave you on your own in the world. And tell him also that I don't want to die…" I went, knocked at Granddad's door, he opened it, and as soon as he saw me, he straight away wanted to close the door, but I grabbed hold of it with both hands and shouted, 'Mummy's dying, she wants to see you, go to her!…' But he pushed me away and slammed the door shut. I returned to Mummy, lay down beside her and put my arms around her and didn't say anything… Mummy put her arms around me too and didn't ask any questions…"

At this point Nikolai Sergeich leant heavily on the table with one hand and got up, surveying us through strange, bleary eyes before slumping helplessly back in his chair. Anna Andreyevna was no longer looking at him; she was sobbing and hugging Nelly…

"On the last day before she died late in the afternoon, Mummy called me over and took my hand and said, 'I shall die today, Nelly.' She wanted to say something else but couldn't any more. I was still looking at her, but she wasn't seeing me I thought, just held my hand tightly in hers. I took my hand out gently and ran out of the house, and I ran all the way to Granddad's place. The moment he saw me, he jumped up from his chair and stared, and was so frightened he went completely pale and began to shake all over. I grabbed his hand and just said, 'She's dying.' He suddenly became terribly flustered, grabbed his stick, and ran after me. He even forgot his hat, though it was cold. I grabbed it and put it on for him, and we ran out together. I was hurrying him and asking him to take a cab, because Mummy was going to die any moment, but he only had seven kopecks on him. He hailed several cabs and haggled with them, but they only laughed, and they laughed at Azorka too who was running with us, but we kept running on and on. Granddad got very tired and he could hardly breathe, but he still kept going. Suddenly he stumbled and his hat fell off. I helped him to his feet, put his hat on for him and began to lead him by the hand, and we got

home just before nightfall… But Mummy was already lying dead. As soon as Granddad saw her, he threw up his hands and stood over her shaking, but not saying anything. Then I went up to my mummy, grabbed Granddad's hand and shouted at him, 'Here, you cruel, evil man, here, look!… Take a good look!' Granddad cried out and fell on the floor as if dead…"

Nelly jumped to her feet, shook herself free of Anna Andreyevna's embrace and stood in our midst, pale, worn out and frightened. But Anna Andreyevna rushed towards her and, flinging her arms around her again, cried out as if under a spell.

"I, I shall be Mother to you, Nelly, and you'll be my child! Yes, Nelly, let's go away, let's leave them, all these cruel, evil people! Let them gloat over others; God, God will be their judge… Let's go, Nelly, let's go from here, come along …!"

Never before nor since have I seen her in such a state, nor did it ever occur to me that she could get so agitated. Nikolai Sergeich drew himself into an upright position in his chair, and spoke in a faltering voice.

"Where are you going, Anna Andreyevna?"

"To see her, my daughter, Natasha!" she cried, pulling Nelly after her towards the door.

"Hold on, hold on, wait!…"

"What's the point waiting, you hard-hearted, cruel man! I've waited long enough, and so has she, goodbye now!…"

Having said this, the good lady turned around, looked at her husband and was thunderstruck. Nikolai Sergeich stood in front of her; he had his hat on, and with weak fumbling hands was hurriedly pulling on his coat.

"You too… you're coming too!" she exclaimed, her hands clasped pleadingly and looking at him in disbelief, as though unable to believe her good fortune.

"Natasha, where is my Natasha! Where is she! Where is my daughter!" the words surged out of the old man's chest at last. "Let me have my Natasha back! Where, where is she!" and, grabbing his walking stick, which I handed to him, he rushed for the door.

"He has forgiven her! Forgiven!" Anna Andreyevna cried.

But Ikhmenev had to stop before he reached the door. It flew open, and Natasha ran into the room, pale, her eyes glinting, as though in fever. Her dress was crumpled and soaked with rain. Her kerchief had slipped down onto her neck, and large drops of rainwater glistened on her thick, loose locks. She ran in, saw her father and, stretching out her hands towards him, fell on her knees.

9

BUT HE HAD ALREADY CLASPED HER in his arms!…

He picked her up and, lifting her as though she were a child, carried her to his chair, sat her down and fell to his knees in front of her. He kissed her hands, her feet; he could not stop, could not stop feasting his eyes on her as if to confirm that she really was back with him, for him to gaze at and listen to – his daughter, his Natasha! Anna Andreyevna, tears streaming down her face, flung her arms round Natasha and, pressing her daughter's head against her bosom, remained perfectly still in this embrace, incapable of uttering a single word.

"My darling!… My love!… My joy!…" Ikhmenev rambled with excitement as he held Natasha's hand and, like a lover, gazed into her pale, thin, but delightful face and into her eyes, which were glistening with tears. "My joy, my child!" he repeated at intervals, gazing at her in unrestrained rapture. "What, what is it I heard about her having gone thin?" he said turning to us with a fleeting, almost childlike smile, still kneeling before her. "She's thin all right, pale too, but just look how pretty! Even better than she was before, yes, better!" he added, coming to an involuntary halt under the weight of his emotions – joyful and sad, enough to rend the heart.

"Stand up, father! Please stand up," Natasha said, "I too want to kiss you…"

"Oh my darling! Did you hear that, did you, Anna? How well she put it," and he put an arm around her convulsively.

"No, Natasha, I have to lie at your feet now till my heart tells me you've forgiven me, because I no longer deserve your forgiveness! I

rejected and damned you, did you hear that, Natasha, I damned you – and that I could have done it!… And you, you, Natasha – how could you believe that I cursed you? You did, didn't you? You shouldn't have! You simply shouldn't have believed it! You cruel thing! Why didn't you come to me? You knew you'd be welcome!… Oh, Natasha, don't you remember how I loved you before – and now, all this time I have loved you twice, a thousand times as much! I loved you with all my heart and soul! I'd have sacrificed my heart for you, I'd have torn it out bleeding and laid it at your feet!… Oh my joy."

"Why don't you kiss me then, you cruel man, on my lips, on my face, like Mother kisses me?" Natasha exclaimed in an unsteady, weak voice suffused with tears of joy.

"And on your dear eyes too! Your dear eyes! Remember, like in days gone by," Ikhmenev went on, releasing his daughter from a long and ardent embrace. "Oh, Natasha! Did you ever dream of us! I dreamt of you nearly every night, and you came to me every night, and I cried over you, and once, when you were still small, remember, you came to me – you were only ten at the time and just starting to learn the piano – you came in a short dress, with your pretty little shoes and rosy arms – she had such rosy little arms then, do you remember, Anna, dear? – she came, sat on my knees and put her arms around me… And you, you, you wicked little girl! You could imagine that I had cursed you, that I wouldn't have you back if you came to me?… You know, I… listen, Natasha – I often used to go to you – Mother didn't know about it, no one knew. Sometimes I'd stand under your windows, or wait for hours on end somewhere on the pavement at your house gate in the hope of catching a glimpse of you from the distance when you came out! And in the evening you often had a candle burning in the window. Natasha, the number of times I came just to look at that candle of yours, just to see your shadow in the window and to bless you for the night. And did you give me your blessing for the night? Did you spare me a thought? Did your little heart tell you I was there at your window? And in the winter nights the number of times I used to mount your stairs and stand on the dark landing, listening at your door for the sound of your voice, your laughter! Me, curse you? Do you realize, I went to you the other

evening to tell you I forgave you, and only turned back at your door… Oh, Natasha!"

He stood up, lifted her out of the chair a little and hugged her to his chest with all his strength.

"She is here again, next to my heart!" he exclaimed. "I thank you, oh God, for everything, everything, for your wrath and for your mercy!… For your sun too, which has now cast its light on us after the storm! I thank you for this moment of joy! No matter that we are humiliated, no matter that we are insulted, but we are together again – and let, let the proud and the arrogant people who have humiliated and insulted us gloat over their triumph! Let them cast stones at us! Have no fear, Natasha… We shall go hand in hand, and I shall say to them, 'This is my dearly beloved daughter, my daughter without sin whom you have humiliated and insulted, but whom I love and bless for ever and ever!…'"

"Vanya! Vanya!…" Natasha said in a weak voice, reaching out towards me from her father's embrace.

Oh! Never shall I forget that she thought of me and called out to me at that moment.

"But where's Nelly?" Ikhmenev asked, looking around.

"Oh my, where is she indeed?" Anna Andreyevna exclaimed. "My poppet! That we should have just left her!"

But she was not in the room; she had slipped into the bedroom unnoticed. Everyone went there. Nelly was standing in the corner, behind the door, hiding from us in alarm.

"Nelly, what's wrong, my dear child!" Ikhmenev exclaimed, wishing to put his arm around her. But she only gave him an odd, sidelong glance.

"Mummy, where's Mummy?" she mouthed inconsolably. "Where, where's my mummy?" she called out once more, stretching out her trembling arms towards us, and suddenly a terrifying cry broke from her breast; her features distorted convulsively and she fell to the floor in a terrible fit…

Epilogue

Final Reminiscences

THE MIDDLE OF JUNE. The day is hot and sweltering; it is unbearable in the city – dust, lime, building sites, baking-hot stonework, fetid air… And suddenly, joy of joys! There is a distant rumble of thunder; little by little the sky becomes overcast; a wind picks up, driving ahead of it clouds of city dust. A few large raindrops fall heavily on the ground and then the heavens seem to open and a veritable torrent of water gushes down upon the city. When a quarter of an hour later the sun looks out again, I fling open the window of my little room and greedily fill my exhausted lungs with the refreshed air. In a state of exhilaration I am ready to throw down my pen and turn my back on all and sundry, including my publisher, and dash to the Vasìlevsky Island to see *them*. But though the temptation is great, I manage to overcome it and again make a furious onslaught on the paper in front of me – come what may, I must finish my writing! My publisher must have it or he will not pay. They are waiting for me *there* now, but I should be free come the evening, completely free, free as air and will get my due recompense for the two days and nights of toil during which I wrote a hundred and sixty pages.

And so the work is finished at last; I throw down my pen and rise with an aching back and chest, and my head is spinning. I feel my nerves are on edge at this instant, and I can almost hear the recent words of my old doctor: "Look here, there is no constitution that can withstand such a strain, it is simply not possible!" However, so far it has been possible! My head is spinning; I can hardly stay on my feet, but joy, ineffable joy fills my heart. My novel is finished, and my publisher, although I am still up to my neck in debt, is nevertheless bound to advance me at least something when he sees the prize in his hands – fifty roubles say, a sum of money that I have not held in my hands for a very long time. Freedom and money!… Joyfully I grab my hat and, with the manuscript tucked

firmly under my arm, I run hell for leather to catch our most esteemed Alexander Petrovich at home.

I barely manage to catch him on his way out. He in his turn has just concluded a non-literary but for all that very profitable deal, and having seen a swarthy-featured gentleman to the door with whom he had been ensconced in his study for the past two hours without a break, welcomes me with a hearty handshake and in his mellifluous bass voice enquires after my health. He is the kindest of men and, in truth, I am much beholden to him. No one can blame him of course that in literature he has all his life managed to be *only* a businessman! He was canny enough to realize that literature needs its businessmen and realized it in excellent good time, and of course I take my hat off to him for that. May he bloom and prosper – business-wise, it goes without saying.

On hearing that the novel is finished, and realizing that the next issue of his journal is therefore in the bag – as regards the main feature anyway – he dissolves in a pleasant smile, genuinely amazed that I have managed *to finish* anything at all, while at the same time he does not refrain from a most charming pleasantry at my expense. Then he approaches his strongbox to give me the promised fifty roubles, along the way handing me a copy of a literary magazine belonging to the opposition, and draws my attention to a few lines in the review section, where my latest novel is mentioned in passing.

I glance at it – it is signed "The Contributor". I'm not exactly being slated, neither am I being praised, and this is fine by me. Inter alia, "The Contributor" observes that my compositions on the whole "reek of perspiration", that is I pore over them so much in the way of mending and amending that as a result it all becomes too much of a good thing.

The publisher and I laugh heartily. I inform him that my previous story was written in the space of two nights, and that just now I had dashed off a hundred and sixty pages in two days and two nights flat – "would that 'The Contributor', who accuses me of excessive fastidiousness and dull deliberation, had known this!"

"Nevertheless, it is your own fault, Ivan Petrovich. Why are you so behind with your work that you have to burn the midnight oil?"

Alexander Petrovich is of course a most charming man, even though he suffers from a peculiar foible of wishing to show off his literary opinions most particularly to those who, as he himself suspects, can see right through him. But I have no wish to discuss literature with him; I take the money and reach for my hat. Alexander Petrovich is himself off to the Islands to his dacha, and on hearing that I'm bound for Vasìlevsky, kindly offers to drop me off in his carriage.

"I've a new carriage. You've not seen it, have you? A real beauty."

We walk along the drive. The carriage is indeed a beauty, and Alexander Petrovich in the first flush of ownership is beaming with pleasure and experiencing even a certain moral obligation to offer to share his equipage with his acquaintances.

In the carriage Alexander Petrovich once more makes several attempts to launch forth into a discussion of contemporary literature. He is uninhibited in my presence and, without batting an eyelid, repeats various unoriginal thoughts that he recently heard from some author or other whom he trusts and whose opinion he respects. Not infrequently he ends up espousing the most bizarre notions. In the process he often distorts other people's ideas or totally misapplies them, such that the end result is complete nonsense. I sit and listen in silent wonder at the variety and unpredictability of human passions. "Here is a man," I say to myself, "with the knack for making money. But no, he also hankers after glory, literary glory, he wants to be remembered as a publisher of quality, as a critic!"

By and by he begins to expound in detail a literary theory which he heard about three days ago, incidentally from myself, and had tried to refute at the time, but is now propounding as his very own. Still, Alexander Petrovich is all too prone to such lapses of memory, and has a reputation amongst his acquaintances for this innocuous weakness. How happy he now is to be holding forth in *his* carriage, how content he is with his lot, how amiable! He is conducting a learned literary conversation and even the soft purr of his genteel bass seems to resonate with erudition. Little by little he throws all caution to the wind and embraces the cynical standpoint that in our literature, as in any other, there never has been nor can be room for any fairness or propriety, and that in the end one just has to accept that it is an out-and-out cutthroat

business, especially at the subscription stage. I cannot help feeling that Alexander Petrovich is inclined to consider every author who is honest and fair-minded if not a fool then at least a simpleton, on account of his very honesty and fair-mindedness. It goes without saying that this appraisal is the direct consequence of Alexander Petrovich's extraordinary ingenuousness.

But I'm no longer listening to him. On Vasìlevsky Island I alight from his carriage and hurry to my dear ones. There is Thirteenth Lane, there is their little house! On seeing me, Anna Andreyevna wags her finger and *shushes* me not to make a noise.

"Nelly's just fallen asleep, poor girl!" she whispers hurriedly, "for goodness's sake, don't wake her up! It's just unbelievable how weak the poppet is. We're frightened for her. The doctor says she'll be all right for the time being. Not that you can get much sense out of that doctor of *yours*! You should be ashamed of yourself, Ivan Petrovich! We were expecting you for lunch… it's been two days since you were here last!…"

"But I told you at the time I wouldn't be coming to see you for the next two days," I whisper. "I had to finish some work…"

"But you promised to come for lunch today! Why didn't you? Nelly got up from bed especially, my little angel, and we put her in the chair and wheeled her out to the table. 'I want to wait for Vanya with the rest of you,' she said, but our Vanya just doesn't want to know. Look, it'll be six o'clock soon! Where on earth have you been? Shame upon you, my dear sir! Have you any idea how much you upset her and what it took me to soothe her!… Thank goodness she's fallen asleep. And on top of that there's Nikolai Sergeich gone into the town (should be back for tea!) And here I am left to struggle all on my own… He's been promised a post, Ivan Petrovich. But when I think that it's in Perm, my heart sinks…"

"And where's Natasha?"

"In the garden, my darling is in the garden! Go and see her… I'm worried about her too… Don't know quite what to think… Oh, Ivan Petrovich, it's all so very sad! She's putting a brave face on it, but I don't believe her… Do go and see her, Vanya, and then tell me just between ourselves what's wrong with her… Do you hear?"

But I am no longer listening to Anna Andreyevna. I rush into the garden. This garden is adjacent to the house; it is about twenty-five paces in length and the same in width, and is a mass of greenery. It has three tall sprawling trees, a couple of young birches, some lilac, honeysuckle, some raspberry bushes in one corner, two strawberry beds and, running criss-cross the length and breadth of it, two narrow winding footpaths. Ikhmenev is delighted with the garden and assures us that there will soon be wild mushrooms in it. But the important thing is that Nelly has grown to like the garden and is often wheeled out in her chair onto one of the paths. Nelly is now the idol of the house. But here is Natasha; she is glad to see me and puts out her hand. How thin she is, how pale! She too has barely recovered from an illness.

"Have you finished it completely?" she asks me.

"Completely, completely! And I'm quite free the whole evening."

"Thank Heavens! You must have rushed! Made lots of mistakes!"

"Couldn't be helped! But, no matter. When I really get going, I get into such a nervous state I can think more clearly, my feelings are more acute and intense, and even the language just flows, so that under pressure the result turns out much better. It's all right…"

"Oh, Vanya, Vanya!"

I cannot but notice that lately Natasha has become very protective of my literary success, of my fame. She reads over and over again everything I have published during the year, keeps asking me about my forthcoming plans, follows every critical review written about me, taking exception to some, and is desperately anxious that I should establish for myself a high literary reputation. She has a way of expressing herself so forcefully and insistently that her attitude takes me somewhat by surprise.

"You'll burn yourself out, Vanya," she says to me, "you'll exhaust yourself and will have nothing to show for it. On top of it you'll ruin your health too. Take S***, he writes one novel in two years, and N*** – only wrote one in ten.* But then everything they write is so polished, so well crafted! Not a single word out of place."

"Yes, they're well off and don't have to meet deadlines. Whereas I'm just a workhorse! Look, this is all rubbish! Let's leave it, Natasha. Now, have you had any news?"

"Lots. For a start, a letter from *him*."

"Another one?"

"Yes." And she handed me a letter from Alyosha. This was the third since they parted. He had written the first while still in Moscow and written it as though he were in a trance. He informed her that circumstances were such that there was no possibility of him returning from Moscow to St Petersburg as had been envisaged at the time of their parting. In the second, he hastened to announce that he would be returning any day now so as to get married to Natasha as soon as possible, that this had been settled and nothing could possibly stand in the way. And yet judging by the tone of the whole letter it was evident that he was in despair, that outside influences had gained total control over him and that he no longer had any faith in himself. He mentioned amongst other things that Katya was his Providence and that she alone comforted and supported him. I eagerly unfolded his latest, *third* letter.

It was on two sheets, disjointed, disordered, scribbled in a hasty, illegible hand, covered with tear stains and ink blots. It opened with Alyosha renouncing Natasha and begging her to forget him. He endeavoured to prove that their union was unrealistic, that external unfavourable forces were stronger than anything, and that ultimately that was how things had to be – he and Natasha together would be unhappy, because they were unsuited to each other. But he was unable to sustain this line and, abandoning his arguments and proofs, launched immediately – without tearing up and discarding the first half of his letter – into self-recrimination, that he was a worthless creature, criminally guilty before Natasha and unable to stand up to his father, who was with him in the country. He wrote that he was unable to express his anguish, asserting incidentally that now he was quite sure of his ability to make Natasha happy, and quite unexpectedly went on to argue that they were in fact well suited. Having in desperation denounced himself for his faint-heartedness and rejecting angrily and vehemently his father's arguments out of hand, he drew a picture of a blissful life together, to which they could look forward if they married, and finished by bidding her farewell for ever! The letter testified to his utter wretchedness; he was clearly beside himself when he wrote it. I was near to tears… Natasha handed me another letter, from Katya. It

came in the same envelope as Alyosha's, but was sealed separately. In a few brief lines Katya stated that Alyosha really was distressed, crying his heart out and close to despair, even physically unwell, but that *she* was with him and he would be happy. Incidentally, Katya begged Natasha not to think that Alyosha would get over things quickly or that his grief were not genuine. 'He will never forget you,' Katya assured her, 'nor could he possibly, because such is his nature. He loves you desperately, will always love you, such that if he ever were to stop loving you, if he ever were to stop grieving at the thought of you, I myself would cease loving him at once…'"

I handed both letters back to Natasha; we exchanged glances and did not say a word. This was how it was with the first two letters also, and in truth we tended to avoid talking of the past as though by mutual agreement. I could see she suffered unbearably, but did not want to admit it even to me. After her return to the parental home she had spent three weeks in bed with fever and was just about recovering now. We did not even speak much about the forthcoming change which was soon to come, although she knew only too well that her father would get his appointment and we would soon have to part. In spite of this, she was so nice, so considerate towards me, so full of solicitude throughout, listened with such rapt, undivided attention to everything that, at her behest, I was obliged to recount about myself that at first I found it quite burdensome – it seemed to me she wanted to recompense me for the past. But this unease soon lifted. I realized she was motivated by something altogether different; she *simply* loved me, she loved me unconditionally, unable to survive without me or remain indifferent to anything that concerned me, and I am pretty sure that no sister ever bore a deeper love for her brother than Natasha bore for me. I knew full well that our forthcoming parting weighed upon her, that it made her suffer. She also knew that I too could not live without her, but neither of us spoke of this, even though we talked at length about forthcoming events…

I asked about Nikolai Sergeich.

"He should be back soon, I think," Natasha replied. "He promised to be in for tea."

"Is he still trying for that position?"

"Yes. However, it's pretty clear he's going to get it now. Frankly, there was no need for him to have gone out today, I feel," she added pensively, "tomorrow would have done."

"So why did he then?"

"Because I got the letter… He's so *concerned* for me," she added after a pause, "that it depresses me, Vanya. I wouldn't be surprised if he dreamt of nothing but me. I'm sure he never thinks of anything except how I am, what I do, what I think about. He reacts to every one of my disappointments. I can see only too well how awkwardly he sometimes tries to take a grip on himself and give the impression he isn't sorry for me, pretending to be cheerful and trying to laugh and make us laugh. Mummy too is not herself on such occasions, and doesn't believe in his laughter either, she just sighs… She's so funny… Bless her!" she added with a laugh. "The moment I got the letter, he just had to go out to avoid looking me in the eyes… I love him more than can be imagined, more than anything in the world, Vanya," she added, lowering her head and pressing my hand, "even more than you…"

We walked up and down the garden a couple of times before she again began to speak.

"Masloboyev called today and yesterday too," she said.

"Yes, lately he's been to see you a lot."

"And do you know why he comes? Mummy trusts him like no one on earth. She's under the impression he's so very well up on everything (the law and all that), that he can fix anything you like. What would you say she's got on her mind now? Deep down she just can't get over the fact that I haven't become a princess. The thought is killing her, and I think she has confided in Masloboyev. She's too afraid to talk to Father about it, and thinks Masloboyev could help her somehow, perhaps by recourse to law. Masloboyev, it appears, hasn't tried to put her off, and she keeps plying him with wine," Natasha added with a smile.

"A bit of a rogue is our Masloboyev. And how do you know all this?"

"Mummy herself let the cat out of the bag… I put two and two together…"

"What about Nelly? How is she?" I asked.

"I'm surprised at you, Vanya – that's the first time you've asked after her!" Natasha observed reproachfully.

Nelly was everyone's darling. Natasha had grown to love her enormously, and Nelly surrendered herself to her with all her heart. Poor child! She never expected to find people who bore so much love for her, and I beheld with joy her embittered heart relenting and her soul opening up to us all. She responded with a sort of frantic ardour to the boundless love that now surrounded her in stark contrast to everything that had gone on before, which had engendered in her mistrust, animosity and stubbornness. To be sure, Nelly even now still clung to some of her old ways, deliberately and persistently suppressing the tears of reconciliation which were welling up in her before she finally gave in to us completely. First she grew to love Natasha with all her heart, then the old man. As for me, I became indispensable to her to such an extent that her illness would worsen whenever I stayed away for any length of time. The last occasion, when I was bidding goodbye for two days so as to catch up on some badly overdue work, I spent much time putting her mind at rest… in a roundabout way, of course. Nelly was still fighting shy of a too direct, too obvious display of her feelings…

She was a cause for common concern. Without a word being spoken, it had been decided that she would remain in Nikolai Sergeich's house for good. In the meantime, however, the day of departure was drawing nearer, but her condition was getting worse and worse. She had been ill since the day when we came to see the old folks, the day of their reconciliation with Natasha. What am I saying? She had always been ill. Her illness had been getting steadily worse long before, but now her decline intensified at an alarming rate. I don't know, and am unable to determine precisely, the nature of her illness. It is true her fits began to occur somewhat more frequently than previously, but the main feature was some kind of overall debility, total loss of strength, interminable feverishness and nervous tension, all of which had made her completely bedridden in the last few days. And strangely enough, the more her illness overcame her, the gentler, kinder, more open Nelly became towards us. Three days previously she caught my hand as I was passing her bed, and pulled me towards her. There was no one else in the room. Her face was burning (she had grown very thin) and her eyes were flashing. She drew herself towards me passionately, convulsively and,

as I leant down to her, flung her thin, olive-skinned arms tightly round my neck and gave me a big kiss, after which she immediately demanded to see Natasha. I called her. Insisting that Natasha sit down next to her on the bed, Nelly looked at her…

"I want to look at you myself," she said. "I dreamt about you last night and I'll dream about you tonight too… I often dream about you… every night…"

It was evident she was overcome with emotion and wanted to speak, but she did not understand her own feelings and did not know how to express them…

She loved Nikolai Sergeich more than anyone else, apart from me. It must be said that he too loved her nearly as much as he did Natasha. He had the amazing knack of being able to cheer Nelly up and make her laugh. Every time he would come to see her, there would immediately be laughter and even pranks. The young patient would perk up like a little child, flirt with the old man, tease him, tell him her dreams, always with some embellishments, force him to recount his own too, and he would be so happy, so pleased as he regarded his "little daughter Nelly" that his delight in her would grow with every day.

"It's God Himself who has sent her to us in recompense for our suffering," he once said to me as he left Nelly's bedside and, as was his wont, made the sign of the cross over her for the night.

Every day when we all used to gather in the evening (Masloboyev came practically every night and the doctor too sometimes, attached as he had become with all his soul to the Ikhmenevs), Nelly was wheeled out in her chair to join us at the round table. The door to the balcony would be flung open. The green garden, bathed in the rays of the setting sun, was then in full view. The smell of fresh greenery and lilac in early bloom wafted in. Nelly would sit in her chair, observing us good-naturedly, listening to our conversation. Sometimes she'd perk up and begin to say something too, hesitantly… On such occasions we all listened to her with anxiety, because her reminiscences contained themes that ought not be touched upon. Natasha, the Ikhmenevs and I felt only too conscious of our guilt about the time that, trembling and exhausted as she was, we had *obliged* her to tell us her story that day. The doctor was particularly opposed to such reminiscences, and usually

tried to change the subject. At times like that Nelly tried to pretend she was unaware of our concerns, and would break into laughter, joined in by the doctor or Nikolai Sergeich.

And still she got worse and worse. She became extraordinarily impressionable. Her heartbeat was irregular. The doctor even told me that she could die very soon.

I did not tell the Ikhmenevs this so as not to upset them. Nikolai Sergeich was perfectly convinced that she would get better by the time they were due to leave.

"Look, Father's back," Natasha said, hearing his voice. "Let's go, Vanya."

Nikolai Sergeich had hardly crossed the threshold when, as was his habit, he began to speak in a loud voice. Anna Andreyevna waved frantically at him. He immediately went quiet and, catching sight of Natasha and me, began to recount in a hurried whisper the result of his enquiries – the position that he had been seeking was securely his, and he was well pleased.

"We can go in a fortnight," he said, rubbing his hands as he shot a concerned sidelong glance at Natasha. But she responded with a smile and embraced him, so that his misgivings were instantly dispelled.

"We're going, we're going, my dear ones, we're going!" he went on, joyfully. "That just leaves you, Vanya. I must say I don't look forward to saying goodbye to you…" (I will add that he never once invited me to go with them, something that, judging by his character, he would surely have done… under different circumstances – that is, if he hadn't been aware of my love for Natasha.)

"Well, what's to be done, my friends, what's to be done! It hurts me, Vanya. But a change of scenery will do us all a power of good… Change of scenery – change of *everything*!" he added with another glance at his daughter.

He believed this and it made him happy.

"And what about Nelly?" Anna Andreyevna asked.

"Nelly? Well, ay… the poor darling is a little unwell, but no doubt she'll recover by then. She's feeling better now, wouldn't you say, Vanya?" he said in alarm, and looked at me apprehensively as though it were up to me to put him out of his quandary.

"How has she been? How did she sleep? Is anything the matter? Is she awake now? Do you know what, Anna Andreyevna, why don't we quickly take the table out on the terrace, fetch the samovar, everyone will gather together, we'll all sit down, and Nelly will join us… Splendid! Perhaps she has woken up already? I'd better go and check. I'll just have a look at her… I won't wake her up, don't worry!" he added, seeing that Anna Andreyevna was again raising a warning hand at him.

But Nelly was already awake. A quarter of an hour later we were all sitting as usual at the table enjoying the evening tea.

Nelly was wheeled out in her chair. The doctor arrived and so did Masloboyev. He brought Nelly a large bunch of lilac, but was preoccupied with something and appeared to be out of sorts.

Incidentally, Masloboyev had been coming nearly every day. I said already that he had become everyone's firm favourite, especially Anna Andreyevna's. However, no one ever mentioned a word about Alexandra Semyonovna; neither did Masloboyev. Having learnt from me that Alexandra Semyonovna had not yet succeeded in becoming his *lawful* spouse, Anna Andreyevna decided that she ought not to be mentioned or welcomed under her roof. This was adhered to, and the fact told a great deal about Anna Andreyevna herself. In fairness though, had she not had Natasha with her and, above all, had it not been for all that had happened, she may perhaps not have been so particular.

That evening Nelly was particularly dispirited, even preoccupied with something – as though she'd had a bad dream and was brooding over it. But she was absolutely delighted with Masloboyev's present and kept looking with relish at the flowers which were placed in front of her in a vase.

"So you love flowers a lot, Nelly, do you?" Ikhmenev asked. "Leave it to me!" he added with animation. "Tomorrow… well, you'll see for yourself!…"

"I do," Nelly replied, "and I remember we used to greet Mummy with flowers. When we were still *out there*." (*Out there* now stood for abroad.) "Mummy was very ill once for a whole month. Heinrich and I agreed that when she got up and came out of her bedroom for the first

time, which she hadn't done for a whole month, we'd deck out all the rooms with flowers. That's what we did. Mummy said one evening that she'd definitely join us for breakfast the next morning. We got up really early. Heinrich brought lots of flowers and we decorated the whole room with green leaves and garlands. There was ivy too, and these really broad leaves – I don't know what you call them – and other kinds of leaves too, the ones that cling to everything, and there were also large white flowers, and narcissi, which I love more than any other flowers, and roses, really lovely roses, and heaps and heaps of flowers. We hung them all out in garlands and stood them in pots, and there were flowers like whole trees in large tubs. We stood them in corners and around Mummy's chair, and when Mummy came out, she was amazed and delighted, and Heinrich was happy… I still remember it…"

That night Nelly was somehow particularly frail and on edge. The doctor kept eyeing her anxiously. But she was very keen to talk. And she talked for a long time of her former life *out there* till it grew dark. We did not interrupt her. *Out there* she had travelled a lot with Mummy and Heinrich, and memories came flooding back to her vividly. She spoke rapturously of blue skies, of huge snow and ice-capped mountains that she had seen and passed through, of high waterfalls; of the Italian lakes and valleys, of flowers and trees, of country people, of their dress and their swarthy faces and dark eyes; she spoke of various encounters they had had and incidents they had witnessed; and also of large cities and palaces, of a tall church with a dome, which would suddenly light up with various colours; and of a hot southern city with blue skies and a blue sea… Never before had Nelly recounted to us her reminiscences in such detail. We listened to her with rapt concentration. Up till then we knew only the reverse side of her recollections, garnered in a bleak, gloomy city, with its depressing soul-destroying atmosphere, its pestilential air, its priceless palaces always covered in grime, its dim, miserly sunlight and its evil, half-crazed people who had brought so much suffering upon her and her mother. And I could picture them both of a dark dank evening huddled together in their miserable bed in a dingy basement, clinging to their memories of the past, of their deceased Heinrich and the marvels of foreign lands… I also thought of Nelly recalling all this when she was

already on her own, without her mother, with the violent and unspeakably cruel Bubnova trying to break her and force her into an immoral act…

But finally Nelly began to feel ill and we took her back. Nikolai Sergeich was very nervous and lamented the fact that she had been allowed to speak for so long. She fell into a kind of torpor. She had had such attacks before on a number of occasions. After it passed, Nelly firmly demanded to see me. She had something to say to me in private. She was so insistent that on this occasion the doctor himself ensured that her wish was acceded to and everyone left the room.

"This is what I am going to tell you, Vanya," Nelly said after the two of us were left on our own, "I know they think I'm going with them, but I'm not, because I can't. I shall stay with you for the time being. That's what I wanted to tell you."

I tried to reason with her. I told her that the Ikhmenevs loved her so much; that they looked upon her as their own daughter; that everyone would miss her very much; that on the contrary she would find life difficult with me and that even though I loved her very much, it couldn't be helped, we'd have to part.

"No, that's not right!" Nelly replied firmly. "Because I dream about Mummy a lot and she tells me not to go with them but to stay here. She says I've sinned a lot, leaving Granddad on his own, and she cries every time she says it. I want to stay behind and look after Granddad, Vanya."

"But you know your granddad is already dead, Nelly," I said in surprise.

She thought a while and looked at me intently.

"Tell me, Vanya, once more," she said, "how did Granddad die? Tell me everything and leave nothing out."

I was amazed at her demand; however, I began to recount in every detail what happened. I suspected that she was either distraught or at least still unable to think quite lucidly after the seizure.

She listened attentively to my story, and I recall the morbidly feverish glint in her dark eyes as they followed me intently throughout my story. It was already dark in the room.

"No, Vanya, he's not dead!" she said decisively, having heard out everything to the end and thought a little. "Mummy often speaks to me

about Granddad, and when I said to her yesterday that Granddad was dead, she was very upset and burst into tears and said to me he wasn't, that I'd been deliberately told to believe so, but that he was really walking about begging – 'Like the two of us did previously,' Mummy said, 'and he always walks in the same place where we both met him the first time, when I fell in front of him and Azorka recognized me…'"

"That was a dream, Nelly, a sick dream, because you're ill yourself now," I said to her.

"I too thought it was only a dream," Nelly said, "and didn't tell anyone. You were the only one I was going to tell about it. But today, when I fell asleep after you didn't come, I dreamt of Granddad himself. He was sitting at home, waiting for me, and he was so frightening and so thin, and said he hadn't eaten for two days, neither had Azorka, and he was very angry with me and told me off. He also told me that he had completely run out of snuff, and that he couldn't live without it. He did actually tell me this once, Vanya, after Mummy was already dead when I came to see him. He was very ill then and could hardly understand a thing. So when I heard this from him today, I thought, I'll go and stand on the bridge till I get enough to buy him some bread, boiled potatoes and snuff. And it was just as if I was standing there begging, and Granddad walking around nearby, approaching slowly to see how much I'd got, and in the end taking it all from me – 'That'll be for the bread, now for the snuff.' I carried on begging, but he'd just come up and take it all away. I told him that I'd have given it to him just the same and wasn't going to keep anything back for myself. 'No, you're stealing from me. Bubnova too tells me you're a thief that's why I'll never let you come and live with me. There's a five-kopeck piece missing, what have you done with it?' I cried because he didn't believe me, but he wouldn't listen and just kept shouting, 'You stole five kopecks!' and then he started hitting me right there on the bridge, and it hurt. And I cried a lot… That's when I thought to myself, Vanya, he must definitely be alive, and walking around somewhere alone, expecting me to join him…"

I again began to reason with her, and I thought I had finally succeeded in putting her mind at rest. She replied that she was afraid to fall asleep in case she saw her granddad again. In the end she gave me a big hug.

"All the same I can't leave you, Vanya!" she said to me, pressing her face against mine. "Even if it wasn't for Granddad, I still wouldn't leave you."

Everyone in the house was alarmed at Nelly's seizure. I told the doctor in a low voice about her ranting and asked him to tell me once and for all what he thought of her illness.

"No one can tell anything yet," he replied thoughtfully. "For the time being I'm hypothesizing, racking my brains and watching, but… no one can tell anything. There's no possibility of recovery. She will die. I haven't told them that because you asked me not to, but I'm sorry for them and I'll suggest holding a consultation tomorrow at the latest. Perhaps the illness will take a different turn after the consultation. But I couldn't be more sorry for this little girl if she were my own daughter… Dear, sweet child! And such a lively mind too!"

Nikolai Sergeich was particularly agitated.

"Look here, Vanya, this is what I propose," he said. "She adores flowers. Now then, why don't we organize the same kind of welcome for her with flowers when she wakes up tomorrow as she was telling us today she and that Heinrich had done for her mother… She was so excited about it…"

"Excited – that's the trouble," I replied. "Excitement is the last thing she needs now…"

"Yes, but pleasurable excitement is quite another matter! Take it from me, my friend, listen to the voice of experience, pleasurable excitement is all right. Pleasurable excitement can effect a cure, bring her back to health…"

In a word, Ikhmenev was so taken with his own idea that he was quite over the moon. It was impossible to contradict him. I turned to the doctor for advice, but before the latter had time to gather his wits, Ikhmenev had already grabbed his hat and dashed off to execute his plan.

"Here's what we'll do," he said to me as he turned to leave, "there's a nursery close by – very well stocked. They've a flower sale on, you can get some real bargains!… Amazing how cheap! Explain it to Anna Andreyevna, or she'll be upset at the expense… There now… Yes! One more thing, my boy – where are you off to now? You've cleared the

deck, you've finished your work, so why rush back home? Stay the night with us, upstairs, in the garret – remember, like you did before? Your mattress and your bedding – it's all still there, nothing's been touched. You'll sleep the sleep of the just. Aye! Do stay. We'll wake up nice and early tomorrow, they'll fetch the flowers, and together we'll have the whole room decked out by eight o'clock. Natasha will lend us a hand too. Let's face it, she's got more taste than you or I… Well, what do you say? Will you stay?"

It was decided I'd stay the night. Ikhmenev saw to everything. The doctor and Masloboyev said goodbye and left. The Ikhmenevs went to bed early, at eleven o'clock. Before leaving, Masloboyev seemed to have something on his mind and wanted to speak to me, but changed his mind. However, after bidding goodnight to the old couple and withdrawing to my garret, I was surprised to see him again. He was sitting at the table waiting for me as he leafed through a book.

"I came back, Vanya, because it's better to say it all now. Take a seat. You see, it's all very silly really, I feel like kicking myself in fact…"

"What's the matter?"

"That bastard Prince of yours will be the end of me. He made my blood boil two weeks ago and I still can't get over it."

"What was that? Are you still in touch with the Prince?"

"Well, there you go, 'What was that?' – as though something, God knows what, has happened. You, Vanya, are just like my Alexandra Semyonovna and all the rest of the insufferable women folk… Can't abide them!… A chicken only has to flap its wings and immediately, 'What was that?'"

"All right, don't get excited."

"I'm not, but you must take everything as it comes, not exaggerate matters… that's what."

He paused a little as though he still had a bone to pick with me. I did not interrupt him.

"You see, my friend," he began again, "I hit upon a trail… that is I didn't hit on anything nor was there any kind of a trail either, it just seemed to me that… that is by putting two and two together it occurred to me that Nelly is… maybe… Well, in a word, the Prince's legitimate daughter."

"Really!"

"There you go again, 'Really!' It's just impossible to talk to people like you!" he exclaimed with a frantic gesture of his hand. "Did I say anything definite to you, you feather-head! Did I say, she was a *fully fledged legitimate* daughter of his? Did I or did I not?"

"Come, come, Masloboyev," I interrupted him, bursting with excitement. "For Heaven's sake, keep your hair on and come to the point, will you? I promise I'll listen. Try to understand how important this is and what the consequences—"

"Consequences, he says, but of what? Where's the evidence? It's not that simple, and I'm talking to you in confidence now. As to the reason why I brought all this up – I'll tell you later. Suffice it to say there is a reason. So shut up and listen, and remember it's all between you and me…

"You see, these are the facts of the matter. It all goes back to last winter, even before Smith's death, as soon as the Prince got back from Warsaw. That is, he had started the ball rolling even much earlier, the previous year, but at the time he was trying to find out one thing, and later it turned into something else. The main thing, however, was that his trail had gone cold. It was thirteen years since he'd parted from the Smith woman and dropped her, but all these thirteen years he had kept track of her without letting up. He knew she was living with that Heinrich who cropped up in the conversation today, he knew that Nelly was with her and knew she was ill. In a word he knew everything, only suddenly he lost track of her. And evidently this happened soon after Heinrich's death, when she decided to move to St Petersburg. In St Petersburg, of course, he'd have soon found her no matter under what name she had returned to Russia. But the trouble was that his foreign agents had fed him false information – they assured him that she was living in some out-of-the-way one-horse town in southern Germany. They themselves got it wrong through sheer incompetence, mistaking someone else for her. This went on for a year or so. After a year had gone by, the Prince began to have his doubts – certain facts had led him even earlier to suspect the woman wasn't the one. The question then arose: where had the real bird flown? And it occurred to him (though he had nothing concrete to go on) that she might be in St Petersburg.

So, while the search went on abroad, he instigated another one here, but apparently didn't care to make it too official and got in touch with yours truly through someone's recommendation – there's a fellow, they said, does things on the side – well, and so on and so forth…

"Well, he put me in the picture, but he muddied the waters, the son of a bitch! His story was full of holes and ambiguities. There were inconsistencies one on top of another, and he kept repeating the same old things, and altering his story as he went along… Well, it was just what you'd expect – trying to be too clever by half. Of course, I went along with all his claptrap – in a word, your humble servant. But, following an old and trusted rule of mine that is yet firmly grounded in Nature's law (Nature never betrayed anyone), I argued, first – was I given the right piece of information? Secondly – might there not be concealed behind what he had said something else entirely? For in the latter case, as no doubt even you, my dear boy, would readily surmise with that poetic mind of yours, he was short-changing me. Since one piece of information may be priced at one rouble say, but another at four times as much, I'd have had to have been a prize idiot to let go for a rouble what was worth four. I began to delve and dig deeper, and little by little the picture started to emerge – some things I managed to extract from him, others from certain other people; as regards the rest – I worked it out for myself. No doubt you'll ask me, why exactly did I decide to act in that way? I will reply: only because the Prince appeared to get altogether too ruffled, too afraid of something. Since, if you thought about it, what was there to be afraid of? He took his mistress away from her father, she got pregnant and he abandoned her. What's so surprising about that? A charming, pleasant prank and nothing more. Hardly anything for the likes of the Prince to be perturbed about! But perturbed he was… This was what aroused my suspicion. I came across some highly interesting clues, my friend, incidentally through Heinrich. He died, of course, but one of his cousins (she's now here in St Petersburg married to a baker) who was madly in love with him from way back and who had continued to love him for all of fifteen years, despite her fat Teutonic baker of a hubby and the eight kids she bore him in passing – from this cousin, I repeat, I managed by way of various highly sophisticated stratagems to glean a very important fact.

Heinrich, in typical German fashion, had written her letters and had kept a diary, and before his death had sent her some of his papers. The silly woman missed all that was important in his letters and took in only the bits about the moon, about 'Ach, du lieber Augustin!' and, I think, about Wieland.* But I obtained important evidence and in the letters came upon fresh leads. For instance, I found out about Mr Smith, about the money his daughter had purloined from him, about the Prince who had got his hands on it. Finally, picking my way through the various pronouncements and allegorical allusions in the letters, I managed to glimpse the real truth – mind you, Vanya, nothing specific, you understand! Heinrich, the silly fool, bless him, was concealing things deliberately and speaking in riddles – well then, what with the riddles and one thing and another, gradually the light began to dawn. You realize: the Prince was married to the Smith woman! But where? How? Precisely when? Abroad or here? The whereabouts of the documents? Not a clue. Take it from me, Vanya old chap, I was tearing my hair with frustration and didn't stop searching for days on end!

"At last I tracked down old Smithy too, but he went and died on me. Never even had a chance to clap my eyes on him in the flesh. Then, by coincidence, I suddenly discovered that a woman I had been keeping my eye on died on Vasìlevsky Island. I made enquiries and – came upon the right track. I rushed to Vasìlevsky and, if you remember, that's where I happened to run into you. I found out a heap of things on that occasion. In a word, Nelly too helped me a great deal—"

"Listen," I interrupted him, "do you really think Nelly knows?…"

"Knows what?"

"That she's the Prince's daughter?"

"You know yourself that she is," he replied, looking at me with some kind of an inimical reproach, "so why these idle questions, you silly man? The main thing is not that she knows she's his daughter, but that she knows she's his *legitimate* daughter – do you understand that?"

"That's impossible!" I exclaimed.

"That's what I said, impossible, at first, and even now I sometimes say to myself, impossible! But the whole point is, it is *possible* and in all probability that's just how it *is*."

"No, Masloboyev, you're wrong, you got carried away," I exclaimed. "Not only does she not know this, but she really is his love child. What mother could, with any kind of documents available to her, endure so much suffering as she did here in St Petersburg, and on top of that condemn her child to such deprivation? Come off it! It's just not possible!"

"That's what I thought myself; in fact it's still beyond me even now. But then again you've got to remember that the woman herself was as mad as a hatter. She was quite extraordinary. Just consider all the circumstances, the romanticism of it all – all the star-gazing rubbish of the most outlandish and mind-boggling kind. For example, right from the word go she dreamt only of a kind of heaven on earth and of angels, she fell hopelessly in love, she put all her trust in him, and I'm sure lost her mind, not because he stopped loving her and deserted her, but because she had been wrong about him, because she had failed to recognize that he *was capable* of deceiving and deserting her, because her angel turned out to be a piece of dirt who abused and degraded her. Her romantic and crazed soul could not cope with such a transformation. And on top of that, consider her wretchedness – do you realize how miserable she must have been! She was terrified, but it was above all else her pride that made her shrink from him in infinite contempt. She broke all ties, tore up all documents, spat on the money, forgetting it wasn't even hers but her father's, turned her back on it as though it were dirt, filth – so as to crush her wrongdoer, crush him by virtue of her own moral rectitude and brand him the thief he actually was and give herself the right to despise him all her life – and quite likely told him there and then she found it offensive to be called his wife. We've no divorce in our country, but to all intents and purposes they were divorced, and after that she could hardly have asked him for assistance! Just think what that crazed woman said to Nelly when she was already on her deathbed – don't go back to them, work, perish if you must, but don't go to them, whoever tries to *call* you (that is, even at that stage she was hoping she'd be *called*; consequently she'd have an opportunity to get her own back for the second time, to crush the *caller* with contempt – in a word, she sustained herself not by bread but by fancies of hatred and detestation). I got a great deal out of Nelly

too, my friend – and even now I'm still managing to pump her for information. Of course, her mother was sick, consumptive – this illness is especially prone to provoke animosity and every kind of irascibility. However, I've definite information from one of Bubnova's girls that she wrote to the Prince – yes, to the Prince, to the Prince himself…"

"She did! And did the letter reach him?" I exclaimed with impatience.

"Well, that's the point, I don't know if it reached him. She'd been in contact with this girl (remember the tarty-looking one at Bubnova's? She's been put in a house of correction since), well she was going to send the letter with this girl, had already written it in fact, but in the event took it back and held on to it. That was three weeks before her death… The thing to note is that, if she had once decided to send it, then, even if she took it back, she could have sent it on another occasion. And so, I've no idea if she sent the letter or not. But there is one reason to believe she didn't, because it seems the Prince found out *for certain* that she was in St Petersburg, as well as her precise whereabouts, only after her death. I bet he must have been delighted!"

"Yes, I remember Alyosha talking about some letter, which had made his father very happy, but that was very recently, about a couple of months ago, if that. Well, what then, what happened then, how did you get on with the Prince?"

"With the Prince? You may well ask. How about this? Total moral certainty and not a scrap of concrete evidence to support it. *Not one* – try as hard as I may. The situation was a fraught one! I ought to have made enquiries abroad, but where abroad? No idea. I realized of course that I had a fight on my hands, that I'd be able to cow him only by subterfuge, by pretending that I knew more than I actually did…"

"So what happened?"

"He stuck to his guns, but in the end he funked it, and funked it so badly he still hasn't quite got over it. We had a few encounters – what a Lazarus he turned out to be! At one stage he took to telling me everything as if I were a bosom pal. That's when he thought I knew *the lot*. He kept it up well, to a fault – the lying hound. It was then that I twigged just how much he was afraid of me. I took to acting really dumb, though outwardly I had to pretend I had one over him. In the end I made a show of putting the frighteners on him – it was all mock

real. I was deliberately rude to him to the point of threatening him, well, just so that he'd take me for a simpleton and drop his guard. He saw me coming, the bastard! On another occasion I pretended I was drunk – that didn't work either. The cunning fox! You see, Vanya old chap, I don't know if you can follow me, but all along I needed to find out just how wary he was of me, and at the same time to convince him that I knew more than I actually did…"

"Well, so what happened in the end?"

"Nothing happened. I needed evidence, facts, and I didn't have them. But one thing he did see: I could make his name mud. Of course, a scandal was just what he was afraid of most of all, the more so since he'd started to make contacts here. You do know, he's getting married, don't you?"

"No…"

"Next year! He's picked himself a bride a year ago. She was just fourteen then; now she's fifteen, still wears a pinafore, I believe, poor thing. Her parents are delighted! Do you see he couldn't have considered such a thing unless his wife was dead? Her father's a general, wealthy girl – pots of money! You and I, Vanya old chap, will never marry like that… The only thing I'll never forgive myself as long as I live," Masloboyev cried out, bringing his fist down hard upon the table, "is that he outsmarted me, two weeks ago… the villain!"

"How so?"

"Just like that. I could see he'd twigged I had nothing *positive* on him, and finally I saw that the more I dragged things out, the more he'd sense my helplessness. Well, so I agreed to accept two thousand roubles from him."

"You took two thousand roubles!…"

"In silver, Vanya, perversely, but I took it. Just think for yourself, was that the best price I could have got! To my shame I took it. I ought to be shot for it. He says to me, 'I hadn't paid you yet for your former services,' (he had though long ago, one hundred and fifty roubles, as was agreed) 'well, I'm going away now. Here's two thousand and I hope we're now all quits over *this business of ours*.' Well I replied, 'Absolutely, Prince,' and even as I spoke I didn't dare look in his face – I was sure one thing was written all over it: 'You haven't made much

on this, have you? And what you're getting from me is purely out of the goodness of my heart, idiot that you are!' I can't even remember how I slunk from his presence!"

"But that's disgraceful, Masloboyev!" I exclaimed. "What have you done to Nelly?"

"Disgraceful is not the word, it was criminal, it was abominable… It was… it was… unspeakable!"

"Good Heavens! He should at least provide for Nelly!"

"Of course he should. But how are you going to make him? Frighten him? It's not going to work, because I took the money. I myself admitted to him that all my suspicion amounted to was just two thousand roubles in silver – I myself as much as named the sum! How are you going to frighten him now?"

"And does it, does it mean that Nelly's case has collapsed?" I exclaimed almost in despair.

"Not on your life!" Masloboyev responded fervently and with a start. "No, I'm not going to let him get away with it! I'll start all over again, Vanya – I've already decided! So what if I took two thousand? So what! I took it for the offence, you see, because the bastard had strung me along, in other words made a fool of me. Swindled, and on top of that made a fool of me! Nobody makes a fool of me… This time I'm going to start with Nelly herself. Something tells me that's where all the clues are to be found. She knows *everything*, *everything*… Her mother must have told her all about it – could have been when she was depressed or raving, when there was no shoulder to cry on except Nelly's, and she would have told her. Perhaps we might even come across some document or other," he said excitedly, rubbing his hands in glee. "Now you understand, Vanya, why I've been coming here? First out of friendship for you, that goes without saying, but mainly to keep an eye on Nelly, and thirdly, Vanya old chap – whether you want to or not, you've got to help me – because you have influence over Nelly!…"

"Of course, I swear to you," I exclaimed, "and I hope, Masloboyev, you'll be doing it first and foremost for Nelly – a poor deprived orphan – and not just for your personal benefit—"

"What's it got to do with you whose benefit I'll be doing it for, my good man? It's the doing of it that matters! Of course the orphan must

be at the top of the list, that's only common humanity. Only Vanya, my old cock, don't condemn me outright if I have a care for myself too. I'm a poor man, and he shouldn't dare ride roughshod over poor people. The bastard robs me of what's rightfully mine and then makes a fool of me into the bargain! You tell me one good reason why I should spare the scoundrel after all that? Like hell I will!"

But our floral tribute the following day did not come off. Nelly got worse and she could no longer leave her room.

Nor did she leave it again ever.

She died two weeks later. In those two weeks of her agony she never quite came to even once or shook off her weird fantasies. Her mind appeared to have warped. Right up to her death she was firmly convinced that her granddad was calling her and getting angry with her for not responding, beating the ground at her with his stick and ordering her to go begging for bread and snuff. Often she would cry in her sleep and on waking tell us that she had dreamt of her mummy.

Only occasionally did her mind appear to clarify completely. Once, she and I happened to be alone, when she suddenly leant forwards and grabbed my hand with her thin, feverishly hot fingers.

"Vanya," she said to me, "when I'm dead, promise you'll marry Natasha!"

I believe that was the one thought that had been uppermost in her mind for a long time. I smiled at her in silence. On seeing me smile, she smiled back, wagged her thin little finger at me roguishly and immediately began to kiss me.

Three days before her death, on a wonderful summer's evening, she asked for the blinds to be drawn back and her bedroom window opened. The window looked out on to the garden. She gazed a long time at the lush, green foliage, at the setting sun, and all of a sudden asked for us to be left alone.

"Vanya," she said in a barely audible voice, because she was already very weak, "soon I shall die. Very soon, and I want to ask you, not to forget me. As a keepsake I'm going to leave you this." (And she showed me a large amulet, which was hanging round her neck together with a cross.) "It was Mummy who left me this when she was dying. So there,

after I'm dead, take this amulet off me, take it and read what's inside. I'll tell them all today to give it to you and to no one else. And after you've read what's inside, go and tell *him* that I'm dead and I haven't forgiven *him*. Tell him also that I've been reading the Bible recently. It says there: forgive all thy enemies. Well, I read it, but I still haven't forgiven *him*, because when Mummy was dying and could still speak, her very last words were '*I curse him*' – well then, I too curse *him*, not for my own sake, but for Mummy's… Tell him how Mummy died, how I was left on my own at Bubnova's. Tell him you saw me there, tell him everything, everything, and while you're about it tell him I preferred to stay at Bubnova's rather than go to him…"

As she said this, Nelly went pale, her eyes flashed and her heart began to beat so fast she had to lean back on her pillows and for about a couple of minutes could not utter a single word.

"Ask the others to come in, Vanya," she said at last in a weak voice, "I want to say goodbye to them all. Goodbye, Vanya!…"

She embraced me tightly for the last time. Everyone came into the room. The old man could not bring himself round to the idea that she was dying – he could not contemplate such a thing. Right up to the last he argued with everybody that she would recover. He had completely worn himself out with worry as he sat days, even nights on end, at her bedside… The last few nights he had literally not slept a wink. He tried to anticipate her least caprice, her least wish, and, on leaving her to join us, cried bitterly, but a moment later would be full of hope again, assuring us that she'd recover. He filled the whole of her room with flowers. On one occasion he bought a whole bunch of the most magnificent red and white roses that he had to walk for miles to find and bring to his little Nellikins… All this could not but unsettle her. She could not help but respond with all her heart to such all-encompassing love. That evening, the evening of our farewell, Ikhmenev was quite reluctant to bid his final adieus. Nelly smiled at him and the whole evening tried to appear happy, joked with him and even laughed… We all left her room almost in hope, but the following day she was no longer able to speak. Two days later she died.

I remember the old man adorning her coffin with flowers and looking with despair at her wasted lifeless features, at her lifeless smile, at her

arms crossed on her chest. He cried over her as though she had been his own child. Natasha, I and everybody else tried to console him, but he was inconsolable and, after Nelly's funeral, fell seriously ill.

Anna Andreyevna herself handed me the amulet which she had taken from Nelly's neck. In it was her mother's letter to the Prince. I read it on the day Nelly died. She addressed the Prince with a malediction, saying she was unable to forgive him, and went on to describe all her past life and the horrors to which she was abandoning Nelly, imploring him to do at least something for the child. "She's yours," she wrote, "she is *your* daughter, and *you know yourself* that she is *your legitimate daughter*. I've told her to go to you after my death and hand this letter to you personally. If you don't turn Nelly away, perhaps I'll forgive you *there*, and on the Day of Judgement shall myself stand before the throne of God to implore the Almighty for the forgiveness of your sins. Nelly knows the contents of this letter; I read it to her; I explained *everything*, she knows *everything*, *everything*…"

But Nelly did not fulfil her mother's command – she knew everything, but did not go to the Prince and died unreconciled.

After we returned from Nelly's funeral, Natasha and I went out into the garden. The day was hot, bathed in sunshine. In a week's time they were due to depart. Natasha cast me a strange, long look.

"Vanya," she said, "Vanya, do you realize it was all just a dream!"

"What was?" I asked.

"Everything, everything," she replied, "everything that happened this year. Vanya, why have I destroyed your happiness?"

And in her eyes I read, "We could have been happy together for ever!"

Note on the Text

This translation is based on the Russian text taken from volume 3 of the *Complete Edition in Thirty Volumes* of Dostoevsky's works, edited by G.M. Fridlender (*Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*), produced in Leningrad in 1972–87 by the Nauka publishing company.

Notes

p. 12, Mephistopheles : The name of the devil in the Faust legend, to whom Dr Faust sells his soul.

p. 3, a Gavarni illustration to a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann : Paul Gavarni (1804–66) was a celebrated French illustrator and cartoonist. E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) was the famous German writer, painter and composer whose supernatural tales explored the foibles of human nature and were a great influence on Dostoevsky's work.

p. 4, a patrician in the German sense of the word : In medieval Germany, wealthy non-noble citizens formed guilds were known as Patrizier and given local administrative and ceremonial posts. This title was transmitted by birth.

p. 4, 'Ach, du lieber Augustin!' : A seventeenth-century Viennese folk song about Marx Augustin, a famous local street singer who drunkenly falls into a pit of plague victims and is taken for dead.

p. 5, famous wit Saphir : Moritz Gottlieb Saphir (1795–1858) was an Austrian journalist and humorist, who wrote in Vienna, Berlin, Munich and Paris and whose controversial wit often landed him in hot water.

p. 7, Aber : "But" (German).

p. 9, ein Glas : "A glass" (German).

p. 9, Schwernot! Was für eine Geschichte! : "Misery! What a story!" (German).

p. 10, Vasìlevsky: The name of the largest of the islands at the mouth of the Neva. At its eastern extremity are a series of parallel streets, formerly canals, which are known as линии, [linii] (plural), линия, [liniya] (singular); literally, lines, line, respectively. They are referred to by numbers, 1 to 27. Here the equivalent used is "lane", hence "Sixth Lane".

p. 13, The Children's Reader: The Children's Reader for the Heart and Mind (1785–89) was the first Russian reader for children and adolescents.

p. 16, some hundred and fifty souls: Under serfdom (abolished in 1861) the value of an estate was assessed principally by the number of serfs (souls) attached to it. *p. 19, "a pauper – scion of an ancient line"*: From the poem 'The Princess' by Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–87). *p. 25, B.*: Visarion Belinsky (1811–48) was Russia's most famous literary critic, responsible for launching Dostoevsky's first novel *Poor Folk* (1846). Ivan Petrovich, a lightly autobiographical figure, is writing that very novel on the pages of *Humiliated and Insulted*, published in 1861. Having read *Poor Folk* in manuscript, Belinsky rushed over to Dostoevsky in the dead of night to get him out of bed and congratulate him.

p. 27, Sumarokov's generalship… court poet Derzhavin… Lomonosov: In the reign of Catherine the Great the playwright Alexander Sumarokov (1718–77) enjoyed a high-ranking civic title which was equivalent to that of an army general. Gavrila Derzhavin (1743–1816) was a poet at the Court of Catherine the Great and subsequently Minister of Justice in the reign of Alexander I. His ode Felicia earned him from Catherine II a diamond-encrusted tobacco casket and five hundred gold coins. Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–65) was a great scientist (discoverer of the atmosphere of Venus), writer, educator – a true polymath. Catherine came to visit him in his home laboratory on 7th June 1764.

p. 28, a Roslavlev, say, or a Yury Miloslavsky: Heroes in the historical novels of the writer Mikhail Zagoskin (1789–1852), Roslavlev or Russians in 1812 (1831) and Yury Miloslavsky or Russians in 1612 (1829), which formed part of the staple reading diet in the household of Dostoevsky's parents.

p. 29, The Liberation of Moscow: A popular historical romance by Ivan Glukharev (1809–c.1840), first published in 1840, a favourite of the previous generation.

p. 31, Chevalier Star: The medal given to those awarded the French order of the Légion d'Honneur.

p. 31, Abbaddonna: An 1834 novel by Nikolai Polevoy (1796–1846) in which the hero conforms to the popular image of the misunderstood poet-dreamer.

p. 49, Scribe: The French playwright Eugène Scribe (1791–1861) enjoyed a long vogue from the 1820s to the 1840s with a prolific output of light social comedies. p. 67, we too… my stepdaughter: According to Russian Orthodox Church law, marriage between a widower and a widow precludes subsequent marriage between their respective children from former unions.
p. 68, Karamzin: The classic twelve-volume *History of the Russian State* by Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826), published 1816-29.
p. 82, Still the ringing… old soul: From the famous (rhymed) 1854 poem 'The Harness Bell' by Yakov Polonsky (1819–98).
p. 92, Gogol's Mr Midshipman: A character in Gogol's 1842 comedy *The Marriage*.
p. 98, 'Dunk it': In Gogol's comic sketch *The Lawsuit*, published around 1839 or 1840, the wealthy old lady landowner Evdokia scribbles, "Dunk it" under her will instead of her name.
p. 98, Quelle charmante peinture!: "What a charming painting!" (French).
p. 128, He gave his shirt collar a flick: "I've had a few" in Russian body language.
p. 130, Cornelius Nepos: Cornelius Nepos (c.100–24 bc) was a Roman biographer, whose writings were a staple for students learning Latin.
p. 131, Frederick Barbarossa: Frederick I, or Frederick Barbarossa, (1122–90) was the Holy Roman Emperor from 1155 to his death in 1190 during the Third Crusade.
p. 132, Je prends mon bien où je le trouve: "I take my goods where I can find them" (French).
p. 141, Penates: The guardian deities of the Roman household.
p. 147, the St Stanislas Order: A civil honour instituted by Tsar Nicholas I in 1829 in recognition of service and contribution to the common weal, as well as the promotion of the glory of the country.
p. 164, the daughter of that king: Servius Tullius, the sixth king of Rome, was murdered by his son-in-law in 534 BC.
p. 204, Yeliseyev's: A luxury department store in St Petersburg – still trading – equivalent to London's Fortnum & Mason.

p. 215, Childhood and Youth: A reference to Tolstoy's groundbreaking semi-autobiographical trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (1852–57). Here Dostoevsky takes a subtle, typically Dostoevskian dig, at his great contemporary whom he never met. Their wish to keep their distance was, of course, mutual.
p. 234, A bientôt!: "See you soon!" (French). Again, Dostoevsky's useof French seems to be erroneous in this context.
p. 237, the incipient reforms: As discussed in the Russian press between 1858 and 1860, the emancipation of the serfs, legal reforms, cen-sorship, law reforms, etc.
p. 238, pire ça va, mieux ça est: "The worse it gets, the better it is" (French). Dostoevsky's erroneous French has been preserved.
p. 249, Pardon, mon ami: "Sorry, my friend" (French). *p. 253, one of your writers*: Ivan Turgenev (1818–83) in his 1860 novel *On the Eve*.
p. 255, mon cher: "My dear" (French).
p. 255, Pulcinella: A stock character, equivalent to Punch, in Italian Commedia dell'arte and puppetry. p. 260, Quelle idée, mon cher… Buvons, mon ami:
"What an idea, my dear", "Let's drink, my friend"
(French).
p. 263, en somme: "In sum" (French).
p. 265, Talleyrand: Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand (1754–1838) was a French diplomat and politician who was famous for his political astuteness.
p. 298, shchi: Along with borsch, one of Russia's most distinctive soups, prepared from cabbage, mostly pickled.
p. 344, Take S***… one in ten: Probably Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and Ivan Goncharov (1812–91) respectively. The latter spent ten years on his classic 1859 novel Oblomov.
p. 358, Wieland: The German Romantic poet Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), author of Oberon (1780).

Extra Material on Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Humiliated and Insulted*

Fyodor Dostoevsky's Life

The family name Dostoevsky was derived from the village Dostoev in the Minsk region. It was granted by the Prince of Pinsk in perpetuity to the boyar Danil Ivanovich Rtishchev in 1506 for services rendered. The city of Pinsk goes back to the eleventh century and forms the heartland of Belorussia. No fewer than four nationalities – Belorussian, Russian, Ukrainian and Polish – go into the composition of the Dostoevsky family tree, and the end result is about as multinational as was possible at the time. The Rtishchevs were Russian, the setting was Belorussian, the suffix "-sky" is predominantly Polish, and over the years some of the Dostoevskys moved and settled in the Ukraine, while others, like the Fyodor Mikhailovich branch, ended up in Moscow. Dostoevsky's father, Mikhail Andreyevich (1789–1839), was the son of a Ukrainian Uniate priest, Andrey Dostoevsky. Fyodor Mikhailovich himself, of course, never considered himself anything other than Russian. The eminent Dostoevsky scholar, Ludmila Saraskina, was recently asked if the writer was not of Polish blood, and she responded: "The Dostoevsky lineage presents a fascinating and unusual mixture of nationalities: in a family where the father was Lithuanian, the mother Ukrainian, there was a cult of Russian literature and history, the cult of reading. The atmosphere was one of devotion to the spoken word, and it is precisely this which above all else shaped the author's creative make-up. Hence, Dostoevsky's Russianness is a wholly cultural rather than ethnic phenomenon." The concept "Lithuanian" must, of course, be understood in the traditional sense as in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which has precious little to do with modern Lithuania.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in Moscow on 30th October 1821. In 1831, his father had bought a small estate, Darovoye, and two years later, the neighbouring Chermoshnya, which would acquire lasting fame as Chermashnya, in the violent murder plot of Karamazov senior in *The Karamazov Brothers*. Speaking of Darovoye, Dostoevsky confessed: "This small, insignificant place left in me the deepest and most memorable impression for life." Fyodor was the second in a family of six siblings. His mother, Maria Fyodorovna (née Nechayeva, 1800–37), a religious minded woman, came from a merchant family. She taught him to read from an edition of *One Hundred and Four Old and New Testament Stories*, and within the family circle there were readings from Karamzin's *The History of the Russian State*, as well as from the works of Derzhavin, Zhukovsky and Pushkin. Dostoevsky often sought the company of peasants, and his discussions with them proved to be a rich source of material for his future compositions.

In 1832 Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail were educated at home by visiting tutors, and from 1833 they were placed in various boarding schools. Dostoevsky found the atmosphere in these establishments oppressive and uncongenial, and his only solace was extensive and intensive reading. From late 1834 to early 1837 the two brothers attended one of Moscow's best private boarding schools, run by the Czech-born Leontiy Ivanovich Chermak, a man of little or no education, but a brilliant, intuitive pedagogue and a humane and understanding father figure. State-run schools, on the other hand, had an overall unflattering reputation for frequent application of the disciplinary rod and staple bad food. The teacher of Russian, Nikolai Ivanovich Bilevich, turned out to be something of a role model and has allegedly served as the prototype for Nikolai Semyonovich in *The Adolescent* (variously known as *Raw Youth* and *Accidental Family*), whom the hero Arkady picked at random as an appraiser of his autobiographical notes. "At long last I decided to seek someone's counsel. Having cast around, I chose this gentleman with purposeful deliberation. Nikolai Semyonovich was my former tutor in Moscow, and Marya Ivanovna's husband…" (*The Adolescent*, penultimate chapter.)

By all accounts Dostoevsky's father, Mikhail Andreyevich, was an upstanding, hard-working family man – his one failing, however, being his touchy, short temper. After the death of his wife in 1837, he retired and settled in Darovoye, where he died on 6th June 1839. Officially the cause of death was recorded as apoplexy, but by all popular accounts he perished at the hands of his peasants, forming a possible clue to the origins of the plot involving the mysterious death of the head of the family in *The Karamazov Brothers*. The loss of his mother in 1837 coincided with the shattering news of Pushkin's fatal duel, which Dostoevsky perceived as a personal bereavement too. Dostoevsky's adulation of Pushkin continued all his life, and reached its apotheosis in 1880, only months before his own death.

In May 1837 he enrolled at the Koronad Filipovich Kostomarov cramming institute, prior to applying to the Central Military Engineering Academy, where he got to know the highly colourful Ivan Nikolayevich Shidlovsky, subsequently a poet and church historian. Originally the name of the principal character in *The Idiot* was to be Shidlovsky, and when responding to Vladimir Solovyev's request in 1873 for some biographical material for an article, Dostoevsky enjoined him to mention his friend. "Make sure you mention him in your article. It does not matter that no one knows of him and that he has not left behind a literary legacy. I beg you, my dear chap, mention him – he was a *major* figure in my life, and deserves that his name should live on." Dostoevsky attended the Engineering Academy from January 1838; unfortunately his brother Mikhail had failed to qualify for entry. The gruelling, soul-destroying military regime was to a large extent relieved by the company of close and devoted friends, the writer Dmitry Vasilyevich

Grigorovich being one of them. It was he who first noted Dostoevsky's reticence and unsociability, and who later recorded the tumultuous effect upon Dostoevsky of his rift with Belinsky and his circle, most particularly with Ivan Turgenev.

The vast bulk of information on Dostoevsky's early life comes from the *Reminiscences* of his younger brother Andrey. He was an architect, and also a meticulously scrupulous and tidy worker in everything he undertook. His *Reminiscences* are well executed, detailed and informative. Quaintly, and for an architect not inappropriately, the book is conceived as a mansion, and the chapters are termed *rooms*.

Dostoevsky's first literary projects were conceived at the Engineering Academy. In 1841, at a soirée organized by his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky read out excerpts from some of his dramatic compositions – *Mary Stuart* and *Boris Godunov* – none of which have survived. On graduation, and having served just under a year in the St Petersburg Engineering Corps, he resigned with the rank of senior lieutenant (поручик) to devote himself entirely to literature.

His first published work was a translation of Balzac's *Eugènie Grandet*, which appeared in 1844. In the winter of the same year he started writing the epistolary novel *Poor Folk*. Dmitry Grigorovich and the poet Nikolai Nekrasov were so taken by it that they spent the night reading it in manuscript. They then headed for Belinsky's and on the doorstep announced, "We've a new Gogol!" to which Belinsky retorted, "Gogols sprout like mushrooms with you!" But having read the work, his enthusiasm knew no bounds: "The novel reveals such profundities of characters and of life in Russia as no one had ever dreamt of before." It was accepted for publication by the *St Petersburg Anthology*, edited by Nekrasov. The praise lavished on the novel obviously went to Dostoevsky's head, because he requested that each page should have a black border to make the work stand out; the astonished Nekrasov refused point blank, and it was published without the borders. It was an overnight success.

At the end of 1845 at a soirée at Belinsky's, Dostoevsky read out selected passages from *The Double*. Belinsky was quite interested at first, but later expressed his disapproval. This marked the beginning of the rift between the two men. Dostoevsky took it very badly and, stressed as he was, the very first symptoms of epilepsy, which were to plague him for the rest of his life, began to manifest themselves.

In spring 1847 Dostoevsky began to attend (on a far from regular basis) the Friday meetings of the revolutionary and utopian socialist Mikhail Petrashevsky. The discussions, which included literary themes, bore on the whole a political and sociological slant – the emancipation of the serfs, judicial and censorship reforms, French socialist manifestos and Belinsky's banned letter to Gogol were typical subjects of debate. In 1848 Dostoevsky

joined a special secret society, organized by the most radical member of the Petrashevsky Circle, one Nikolai Speshnev, by all accounts a colourful and demonic figure, whom Dostoevsky imagined to be his Mephistopheles. The society's goal was to organize an insurrection in Russia. On the morning of 23rd April 1849, the author, together with other members of the group, was arrested and confined in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Many of them, including Speshnev, found themselves depicted twenty-three years later in the pages of *Devils*.

After eight months in the fortress, where Dostoevsky wrote his story *The Little Hero*, he was found guilty of "plotting to subvert public order" and was initially sentenced to death by firing squad, which was at the last moment commuted to *mort civile*, amounting to four years of hard labour and subsequent conscription into the army. His experiences as a convict of the Omsk Fortress are poignantly recorded in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860–62) and the theme of execution itself is treated in some detail in *The Idiot*.

After January 1854 Dostoevsky served as a private in Semipalatinsk, eastern Kazakhstan. Even before his departure for the army, he wrote to Natalya Dmitrievna Fonvizina, the wife of one of the Decembrists (members of the ill-fated uprising in December 1825):

> I seem to be in some kind of an expectation of something; I can't help feeling I'm ill, and that soon, very soon something decisive will happen. I feel that I'm approaching a turning point in my life, that I've reached a state of maturity and am on the verge of something peaceful, blithe – perhaps awesome – but certainly inevitable.

These were prophetic words. Almost immediately on arrival in Semipalatinsk he made the acquaintance of a minor clerk, Alexander Ivanovich Isayev, an impoverished customs-and-excise officer and alcoholic, and his wife, Maria Dmitrievna. Mrs Isayeva was then twenty-nine years old. Dostoevsky fell head over heels for her, although his love was not always requited and she considered him to be "a man with no future". He was no doubt attracted by what he perceived to be her vulnerability and spiritual defencelessness. Dostoevsky's own life was not of the happiest, and the two revelled in bouts of self-pity. And then came a terrible blow: Isayev was transferred to Kuznetsk, some six hundred versts from Semipalatinsk. Dostoevsky took the parting indescribably badly.

In August 1855 Maria Dmitrievna informed Dostoevsky that her husband had passed away. She was in dire straits – alone, without means, in an unfamiliar town, without relatives or friends to help her. Dostoevsky

proposed to her immediately, but Maria Dmitrievna demurred. He realized, of course, that it was his own lowly status that was at the root of the problem. However, with the death of Nicholas I and the enthronement of Alexander II, there was hope in the improvement of the fate of the Petrashevtsy convicts. In December 1855 he was made a warrant officer; this elated him so much that in early 1856 he wrote to his brother of his intention to tie the knot: "I've taken my decision and, should the ground collapse under me, I'll go through with it… without that, which for me is now the main thing in life, life itself is valueless…"

Dostoevsky was so desperately short of money that he implored his brother for a loan of 100 roubles or more, or as much as he could afford. Begging for money was to become a way of life for Dostoevsky. Almost in desperation, he made a daring move. Having obtained official leave to go to Barnaul, he took a secret trip to Kuznetsk. But, to his surprise, instead of being greeted with love and affection, he found himself in a situation such as is depicted in *White Nights* and *Humiliated and Insulted*. Maria Dmitrievna flung her arms round his neck and, crying bitterly and with passionate kisses, confessed that she had fallen in love with the schoolteacher Nikolai Borisovich Vergunov and was intending to get married to him. Dostoevsky listened in silence to what she had to say, and then sat down with her to discuss her prospective marriage to a man who had even less money than he, but had two incontestable advantages – he was young and handsome. Maria Dmitrievna insisted the two rivals should meet and, like the Dreamer in *White Nights* and Ivan Petrovich in *Humiliated and Insulted*, Dostoevsky decided to sacrifice his own love for the sake of others. This fairly bowled Maria Dmitrievna over: Dostoevsky wrote to Wrangel, quoting her words to him: "'Don't cry, don't be sad, nothing has yet been decided. You and I, and there's no one else.' These were positively her words. I spent two days in bliss and suffering! At the end of the second day I left full of hope…"

But he had scarcely returned to Semipalatinsk when Maria Dmitrievna wrote to him that she was "sad and in tears" and loved Vergunov more than him. Dostoevsky was again absolutely distraught, but still found it in him to continue
to stand by the love of his life. He would seek to obtain for her an assistance grant on the basis of her deceased husband's government service record, try to enrol her son in the cadet corps and even assist Vergunov in securing a better position.

In those turbulent times, when Dostoevsky imagined he had lost Maria Dmitrievna for ever, there was suddenly new hope. On 1st October 1856 he was promoted to officer, and his dream of being able to return to St Petersburg became a distinct reality. It is unlikely that this was the only cause – Maria Dmitrievna had probably always loved him after a fashion, though obviously never as strongly as he loved her – but her resistance to him

suddenly broke down to the extent that Vergunov simply melted into the background and was heard of no more. Later that month Dostoevsky went to Kuznetsk, sought and obtained Maria Dmitrievna's hand and was married to her on 6th February 1857.

His happiness knew no bounds, but a major blow was just round the corner. On their way back to Semipalatinsk, when the newly-weds had stopped in Barnaul, Dostoevsky, as a result of all the emotional upheaval, had a severe epileptic fit. This had a shattering effect on Maria Dmitrievna. The sight of her husband staring wildly ahead, foaming at the mouth and kicking convulsively on the floor must have been disconcerting and frightening in the extreme. She burst into tears and began to reproach him for concealing his ailment. He was actually innocent; he had been convinced that what he suffered from were ordinary nervous attacks, not epilepsy – at least that's what doctors had told him previously. All the same, he hadn't told her even that much.

They settled in St Petersburg, but the local climate was too uncongenial for her, and she moved to Tver. From then on they saw each other only sporadically, moving, as they did, from town to town and from flat to flat. On 7th June 1862 he made his first trip abroad – alone. He felt he had his own life to lead. Maria Dmitrievna had little to do with it, and she was fast approaching death as she had contracted tuberculosis.

Dostoevsky returned to Russia in September. At the beginning of November 1863 the couple settled in Moscow. Maria Dmitrievna was fighting for her life, but on her deathbed she was getting more and more irritable and demanding. Dostoevsky looked after her assiduously, yet at the same time he was riveted to his writing desk. Her suffering and moodiness are reflected in the description of Marmeladov's wife in *Crime and Punishment* and of Ippolit in *The Idiot*. Maria Dmitrievna died on 14th April 1864.

On his return from Siberia in 1859 Dostoevsky published *Uncle's Dream* and *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, neither of which met with much success. *Notes from the House of the Dead* began its life in 1860 in the daily newspaper *The Russian World* (*Русский мир*), but only the introduction and the first chapter were printed, for Dostoevsky had to keep a wary eye on the censor, as he had pointed out to his brother Mikhail in a letter in 1859: "It could all turn out nasty… If they ban it, it can all be broken up into separate articles and published in journals serially… but that would be a calamity!" Chapters 2–4 were published in subsequent issues in 1861, but it was serialized no further in *The Russian World*. With some notable alterations, the early chapters were reprinted in the 1861 April issue of *Time* (*Время*), a journal he founded jointly with his brother, and the concluding chapter of Part II came out in May 1862. Certain passages, deemed subversive, were excised on the grounds that "morally regressive individuals, who are held

back from crime by the severity of punishment alone, may be misled by the *Notes* to form a distorted impression as to the lack of efficacy of the legally prescribed sanctions" (Baron N.V. Medem, Chairman of the St Petersburg Board of Censors.) *Humiliated and Insulted* was also serialized in *Time* during 1861, and *Notes from the Underground* in *Epoch* (*Эпоха*), the second journal that the Dostoevsky brothers had founded in 1864.

In 1866 Dostoevsky was in dire financial straits and, in what could have been a moment of carelessness, but more likely for fear of being thrown in a debtors' jail, he concluded one of the most dishonest and unfavourable contracts in recorded literary history. The other contracting party was the publisher Fyodor Timofeyevich Stellovsky, by all accounts a ruthless and unprincipled money-grubber. According to the terms of the contract Dostoevsky had to deliver a brand-new novel by 1st November 1866, or lose all rights in all his subsequent compositions for a period of the next nine years. Dostoevsky was to receive three thousand roubles, but contingently on the new novel being completed and delivered within the prescribed period. Over half of this money was already spoken for; it was needed for the discharge of promissory notes, the irony being that most of these – unbeknown to Dostoevsky – were already in Stellovsky's hands. The wily Stellovsky knew perfectly well that Dostoevsky was a sick man and that the epileptic attacks, which occurred on a regular basis, made him unfit for work for days on end; besides, he was also aware that Dostoevsky was committed to completing *Crime and Punishment* and would be unable to write two novels simultaneously. It was very much in Stellovsky's interests that the contract was not fulfilled.

Right up to the end of September Dostoevsky worked flat out on *Crime and Punishment*. This was a novel on which many of his hopes were pinned. It was to be a heavyweight: most of the fiction he had written previously was shot through with humour and had a tongue-in-cheek quality about it, but for whatever reason his best efforts had failed to find wide acceptance, let alone a demand for more either from the public or the critics. He was not giving his readers what they wanted, so *Crime and Punishment* was to change all that. But then came the end of September, and not a word of the contractual novel had yet been penned. The significance of this suddenly hit him. The as yet non-existent – and very likely to remain such – novel was, not inappropriately, to be called *The Gambler*. His friend, the writer Alexander Milyukov, on hearing the sad story, suggested that a few of his fellow writers should pool their efforts and write a chapter or so each, the more so since Dostoevsky had already sketched out a plan; or, if he didn't wish to sacrifice that plan and wanted to keep it for his own use later, they'd work out something new themselves.

Dostoevsky declined, saying that he wouldn't put his name under anything he hadn't written himself. Milyukov then came up with the idea of using a

stenographer. It was thus that the twenty-year-old Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, who by chance had just recently completed a course in the new-fangled (for Russia, at all events) skill of stenography, came on the scene. They started work on 4th October 1866, and on 30th October the manuscript was ready for delivery, the deadline being midnight.

But Stellovsky had one more dastardly trick up his sleeve. He arranged to be out of his office on the day, and there was no one to receive the manuscript. On legal advice, they found out that it would be enough for the script to be lodged at a police station and signed for by a senior officer. Dostoevsky and Snitkina rushed to a police station, and luckily found an officer – usually, come the afternoon, senior officers were in the habit of disappearing without notice. Even so it was not till after 10 p.m. that they obtained the sought-after receipt. And so the novel – a manic, surcharged paean to reckless abandon and desperation – was finished from scratch in twenty-six days flat.

Dostoevsky married Anna Snitkina, twenty-five years his junior, on 15th February 1867. Exactly two months after their wedding, they both went abroad. Anna had taken charge of Dostoevsky's business affairs efficiently, and by and large successfully. She was proving herself indispensable on a second major front, making up for Dostoevsky's inadequacy in dealing with day-to-day practical affairs. But there was a limit even to her frugality, acumen and, above all, the positive influence she could exercise, when she encountered Dostoevsky's incurable penchant for gambling. This had manifested itself during his previous European tour with his mistress Apollinaria Suslova, immortalized as the enigmatic tease in *The Gambler*, whose story Anna was herself ironically obliged to set down on paper from the lips of her future husband.

While gambling with the devil-may-care Apollinaria had a romantic edge to it, indulging the habit on honeymoon with his level-headed, home-making wife Anna – impecunious as they were – became a cruel and pathetic, not to say sordid, human tragedy. He would find himself down to the last penny, dashing over to the tables, staking that very penny, losing it, running back home to pawn his cufflinks, his last remaining possessions, his wedding ring, his winter overcoat, his young wife's lace cloak, on his knees in front of her, beating his breast, with tears in his eyes accusing himself and imploring for forgiveness, and yet begging for just another louis or two from their common purse to go and break even. And it was in these circumstances, his frame continually convulsed by epilepsy, constantly on the move across Europe – like a veritable Flying Dutchman, flitting from one foreign resort to another – that he deliberated over, planned and eventually completed *The Idiot*. Not least of his handicaps was separation from Russia and its living language, which he himself considered essential in maintaining the momentum of his

creative
process.

On 5th March 1868 the couple experienced their first joys of parenthood with the birth of their daughter Sofia, but two months later followed the devastating blow of the infant's death on 24th May. On 26th September 1869 their second daughter Lyubov was born (*d.*1926). The Dostoevskys had two more children: Fyodor, born 16th July 1871 (*d.*1922), and Alexei, born 10th August 1875, who died before he reached the age of three on 16th May 1878.

On their return from abroad to St Petersburg the Dostoevskys were beset by creditors for debts incurred before their departure. Fortunately the plucky and quick-witted Anna was able to fight them off, and the author went on to embark upon and complete the last four of his great works more or less undisturbed. *Devils* was published in 1871; *The Writer's Diary* was begun in 1876 and, at intervals, continued till 1881; *The Adolescent* came out in 1875, followed by *The Karamazov Brothers* in 1880.

On 8th June 1880 Dostoevsky delivered his famous speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin memorial in Moscow organized by the Society of the Friends of Russian Letters. It had a most electrifying effect upon his audience, and has been subsequently referred to as "well nigh the most famous speech in Russian history". Tolstoy declared it a farce, and point-blank refused to attend. It therefore fell to the two remaining pillars of Russian literature, the arch rivals Dostoevsky and Turgenev – who had had it in for each other ever since they first met some thirty years previously – to occupy the centre stage.

Of the two, his imposing, patrician-like physical presence apart, it was Turgenev who, by dint of his reputation abroad, coupled with his progressive, enlightened Western ideology at home, felt that precedence to occupy the throne of Russian literature should be accorded to him, rather than to the reactionary, stick-in-the-mud Slavophile Dostoevsky. Moreover the replies to such RSVP messages as had been received from Western celebrities, notably Victor Hugo, Berthold Auerbach and Alfred Lord Tennyson, were all addressed to Turgenev – doubtless confirming him as the only Russian writer known abroad – though it later transpired that all the three prospective guests from abroad had politely declined the honour to attend.

Still, home-grown honours were not to be spurned, and the two writers, in true prize-fighter fashion, retired to their respective camps to prepare and hone their speeches – Turgenev to his magnificent country seat Spasskoye-Lutovinovo, Dostoevsky to his modest house in Staraya Russa.

The festivities were spread over two days. Turgenev spoke on the seventh of June, Dostoevsky on the eighth. Of all the numerous speakers on the occasion, it was only Turgenev's and, above all, Dostoevsky's performances that have gone down in history. Turgenev, ever the aristocrat, did not indulge

in any personal gibes in his speech. But what he did, as far as Dostoevsky was concerned, was equally hurtful. Having given Pushkin his rightful due, he permitted himself to express some doubt as to whether the author of *Eugene Onegin* may be regarded as a truly national and consequently world poet such as Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe. This question, Turgenev remarked, "we shall leave open by and by for now". Subsequently in his letter home to his wife, Dostoevsky remarked that Turgenev had humiliated Pushkin by depriving him of the title of national poet.

Dostoevsky himself was not present at this speech – he had been preparing his own. His famous speech took place the next day. He delivered an electrifying performance, passionately arguing for the greatness of Pushkin as *the* national writer. He claimed that Pushkin was not only an independent literary genius, but a prophet who marked the beginning of Russian self-consciousness and provided the paramount illustration of the archetypal Russian citizen as a wanderer and sufferer in his own land. Dostoevsky's speech culminated in a plea for universal brotherhood and was met with rapturous applause.

That evening, Anna Grigoryevna records in her *Reminiscences*, after Dostoevsky returned to his hotel late at night, utterly exhausted but happy, he took a short nap and then went out to catch a cab to the Pushkin Memorial. It was a warm June night. He placed the huge laurel wreath at the foot of the memorial and made a deep, reverential bow to his great mentor.

On his return from Moscow in the summer of 1880, Dostoevsky embarked on a burst of writing activity that knows no precedent in Russian literature. There in a course of a few months he finished the bulk of *The Karamazov Brothers*, continued his *Writer's Diary* and kept up an intensive correspondence, while all this time suffering shattering, debilitating fits of epilepsy. But it was not all doom and gloom. The summer of 1880 was particularly warm, perhaps reminding him of gentler climates. His correspondence, going back to these balmy, final days, is characterized by being written in bursts – several letters at a time without a break – during strategic gaps in his work. On completion of *The Karamazov Brothers* in 1880, Dostoevsky made far-reaching plans for 1881–82 and beyond, the principal task being an ambitious sequel to the novel; yet at other moments at the end of that year, he confessed of a premonition that his days were numbered.

Tolstoy, says Igor Volgin, left the world defiantly, with a loud bang of the door, which reverberated throughout the world. By contrast, Dostoevsky's death was very low key. The author Boleslav Markovich, who came to see Dostoevsky just before he died, wrote: "He was lying on a sofa, his head propped up on a cushion, at the far end of an unpretentious, dismal room – his study. The light of a lamp, or candles, I can't remember, standing on a little table nearby, fell directly on his face, which was as white as a sheet, with

a dark-red spot of blood that had not been wiped off his chin… His breath escaped from his throat with a soft whistle and a spasmodic opening and shutting of his lips." Dostoevsky died on 28th January 1881, at 8:36 p.m., according to Markovich's watch.

Dostoevsky's own universal legacy is, of course, indisputable, in the way that Shakespeare's is – meaning that, adulators apart, both have their eminent detractors too. Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence, to mention but three, famously disliked Dostoevsky.

Among the lesser known of Dostoevsky's legacies in the West is what is termed in Russian *достоевщина* (Dostoevshchina). A dictionary definition of *достоевщина* would be: psychological analysis in the manner of Dostoevsky (in a deprecating sense); tendency to perversion, moral licence and degradation in society. This topic falls outside the scope of this account, but readers of his novels would see how in a traditional society, dominated by religion, such as was the case in nineteenth-century Russia, and also in the eyes of such fastidious arbiters as Turgenev, his repeated delving into the seedier aspects of human behaviour could easily attract severe censure. It is therefore fitting to end with the words – expressing Dostoevsky's essential ambiguity – of Innokenty Annensky, one of Russia's foremost Silver Age poets and literati: "Keep reading Dostoevsky, keep loving him, if you can – but if you can't, blame him for all you're worth, only keep reading him… and only him, mostly."

Poor Folk (*Бедные люди*, 1846), Dostoevsky's debut epistolary novel, with which he conquered Belinsky's heart and entered upon the St Petersburg literary stage, is in choice of subject firmly rooted in Gogol. However, in emotional substance and character delineation it goes way beyond anything that the author of *The Overcoat* ever attempted. "People (Belinsky and others) have detected in me a radically new approach, of analysis rather than synthesis, that is, I dig deep and, delving to the level of the atoms, I reach further down to the heart of the matter, whereas Gogol's point of departure is the heart of the matter itself; consequently he is less profound." Although Dostoevsky's self-analysis may not be altogether convincing, the novel itself – an exchange of heart-rending letters between two lost souls – is artistically persuasive. It is set wholly in the stifling bureaucratic, class-ridden Russia of the early-nineteenth century, but in spite of the passage of time has lost none of its universal appeal. The events could easily have been taking place in any epoch, in any society – a lowly official exchanging messages with some unfortunate, repressed female living in the house across the way – but the novel is inherently slow and short on action, which arguably limits its appeal to the reader.

Dostoevsky's next major work, *The Double* (*Двойник*, 1846) is by any standards a most unusual and inventive piece of novel writing. According to Dostoevsky's own evaluation, it was "ten times better than *Poor Folk*". This opinion, however, was not shared by the vast majority of contemporary critics, who had trouble accepting its blend of fantasy and realism. Mr Golyadkin, an ordinary, perfectly unremarkable, naive and helpless nineteenth-century man, is overwhelmed by the pace of progress in a modern metropolis with all the latest waterproof galoshes, open-plan offices, luxury soft-sprung carriages, dazzling gas streetlights and the hectic pace of social life all round, and begins to inhabit another world or, to put it in clinical terms, slowly but surely to lose his mind. The author does not state this in so many words – Mr Golyadkin's mental disintegration is never explained or accounted for. The reader is plunged into the *medias res* of a mad world from the word go. As a result Golyadkin's predicament gains in authenticity because specifics do not stand in the way of the reader identifying himself with the hero; each one of us can supply our own catalogue of examples that threaten our sanity and therefore there is a pervasive atmosphere of "there but for the grace of God go I".

The Double was hugely controversial, and on the whole was pronounced to be stylistically inadequate, a judgement with which Dostoyevsky himself tended to agree, though with important reservations. In 1846 he wrote to his brother: "absolutely everyone finds [*The Double*] a desperate and unexciting

bore, and so long drawn out it's positively unreadable. But, funnily enough, though they berate me for bringing on tedium, they all, to a man, read it over and over again to the very end." This very early novel was already full of innovative, arresting characteristics: agitated, strained dialogue, always disordered, always rambling; madness predominating over method; a perplexed, pathetic soul cruelly disorientated amid confused perspectives of time and place; heart-rending tragedy compounded by a welter of manic Hollywood-type slapstick comedy – this off-the-wall tale of galloping schizophrenia took contemporary readers by storm and left them quite bewildered. Some critics hailed *The Double* as profound, others found it so permeated with the mentally aberrant spirit of Gogol's novella *Diary of a Madman* that it was no longer a question of influence, but of blatant imitation. However, if it was imitation, it was imitation of the highest order.

Like much in Dostoevsky, *The Double* was too far ahead of its time, and it would only find a reading public ready to appreciate and enjoy it to the full much later. For Vladimir Nabokov, who was no fan of Dostoevsky, *The Double* was "the best thing he ever wrote… a perfect work of art". Time and again Dostoevsky expressed, probably under the influence of outside pressures, his intention to "improve" *The Double*; a partially revised version appeared in 1866.

Netochka Nezvanova (*Неточка Незванова*, 1849), a novella which was originally conceived as a full-length novel: in its present form it should be considered as an unfinished work. Dostoevsky deals here with what was to become one of his favourite themes – the psychology and behaviour of an unusually precocious child. The plucky child-heroine Netochka has much in common with Nelly from *Humiliated and Insulted*, particularly in her capacity for boundless love, self-sacrifice and indomitable will-power. They are both fighters who refuse to succumb to life's vicissitudes whatever the odds.

Although the novella still captures the imagination today thanks to its dramatic intensity – which for example prompted a successful theatre adaptation at the New End Theatre in London in 2008 – it is generally considered to contain tedious and long-winded passages, which one outspoken contemporary critic, A. Druzhinin, characterized in 1849 as reeking of perspiration. These words must have rankled with Dostoevsky, because he recalls them with dramatic irony in the epilogue to *Humiliated and Insulted*.

In *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (*Село Степанчиково*, 1859), Dostoevsky again found himself irresistibly drawn to Gogol, who had by then become an obsession. Set on a remote country estate, the story concerns a household completely dominated by the despotic charlatan and humbug Foma Fomich Opiskin, whose sententious utterance contains a good deal of satire on the reactionary Gogol. The owner of the estate, the retired Colonel Rostanev, is a

meek, kind-hearted giant of a man, cruelly dominated by Opiskin. With deftly controlled suspense, the novel builds up to a confrontation between these two.

The chief asset of the work is its rich, dramatic dialogue – *The Village of Stepanchikovo* was in fact first conceived as a drama. It is through their words that Dostoevsky gives flesh and blood not only to the protagonists but also a host of unforgettable minor characters – the perspiringly loquacious and hypochondriac landowner Bakhcheyev, the literary valet Vidoplyasov, the dancing peasant household pet Falaley, the scheming poseur Mizinchikov and the unfortunate heiress Tatyana Ivanovna, touchingly confined in her fantasy world.

Dostoevsky was thirty-nine when in January 1861 *Humiliated and Insulted* (*Униженные и оскорблённые*) began to be serialized in the first issue of *Vremya* (*Time*), the literary periodical which he founded jointly with his brother Mikhail. A much revised version came out in book form in autumn of the same year. It was his fourth novel to date after *Poor Folk* and *The Double* (1846), and *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (1859), neither of the last two being originally designated as novels, but given the stylized titles of "poem" and "tale" (*повесть*) respectively. However, *The Village of Stepanchikovo* and *Humiliated and Insulted* have this in common: that they were written in close succession, straight after his return from the ten-year period of penal servitude and exile in Siberia, and were meant to serve as passports for re-entry to the literary scene from which he was debarred for so long. On his return to St Petersburg from Moscow, he wrote in a letter of 3rd May 1860:

> I'm back here and in a terrible emotional upheaval. The reason for it is my novel. I want it to turn out well, I feel there is a lot of lyricism in it, and I know my whole literary career is in the balance. The next three months I'll have to work tirelessly round the clock. On the other hand when I'm finished, what a reward I'll be able to reap! Inner peace, contentment, awareness that one has done what was required, has got one's own way.

By the time of the *Humiliated and Insulted*, Dostoevsky appears largely to have broken free of the influence of his former idol Gogol, and perfected a compositional style all his own with a lightness of touch and a degree of sophistication that he never surpassed even in his later novels. A salient feature of *Humiliated and Insulted* is the complex, racy plot with its multiplicity of interweaving and overlapping themes, all under tight control in an atmosphere of suspense and expectation. It is clear that Dostoevsky strives to hold the reader's attention as a stage performer might that of a live

audience, never allowing the tension to slacken even for a moment lest someone might get up and leave, lest some reader might shut the book and not reopen it.

In 1861 A. Khitrov, reviewing the newly published *Humiliated and Insulted*, waxed lyrical over Dostoevsky's storytelling powers:

> The story is told in such a way that one cannot accuse the author of fabrication or that such and such could never have happened. On the contrary, the events unfold naturally before the reader's eyes and he feels himself drawn in as an active participant… besides, the fate of the characters is so fascinating that one cannot help reading to the very end…

One of the chief characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels has always been the abundance of action and the whirlwind pace with which it unfolds, the multiple events surprising, shocking, amusing, saddening, but never failing to intrigue the reader. In *Humiliated and Insulted* there are no holds barred as far as engaging the reader's attention is concerned. It starts like a tale of mystery and suspense. The reader is kept in a state of uncertainty, events are crowded, sometimes revealed in reverse chronological order, as for example in Part Four, chapters 4 and 5, where the impoverished landowner's distress and psychological humiliation, culminating in a stark rejection of his desperate attempt to befriend a destitute orphan, are – by being recounted out of sequence – perceived with additional force and poignancy. Above all, contrast is maintained. The St Petersburg setting of the novel is palpably real down to "the dust, the smell of lime, the baking hot stonework and fetid air..." Against this stark, for the most part dreary background, the characters appear to be enveloped in a dreamlike aura of mystery and foreboding, and as the action develops and unfolds, disturbing events emerge from their past to haunt and torment them.

The novel's narrator is Vanya, an indigent young author, who is hopelessly in love with Natasha Ikhmenev, the daughter of a ruined landowner. They were together in childhood when Vanya, an orphan, was taken into the Ikhmenev family. At seventeen he left for St Petersburg. Natasha was then fifteen. Two years later the Ikhmenevs also move to St Petersburg, ostensibly for Ikmenev Senior to pursue a long-standing lawsuit against his bitter foe, Prince Valkovsky. In the meantime Natasha falls hopelessly in love with his son Alyosha, a handsome, frivolous, happy-go-lucky young man. One evening a girl of about thirteen unexpectedly wanders into Vanya's lodgings. He comforts and befriends the girl, whose name is Nelly, and she stays on. She turns out to be terminally ill, and an epileptic. Meanwhile Natasha, who has left her parental home to cohabit with Alyosha, has not only been disowned by her father, but finds she is no longer the sole centre of attraction for her lover. Alyosha has in the meantime fallen in love with a rich young heiress,

Katya. His father, Prince Valkovsky, does everything to encourage this relationship. Ikhmenev loses his lawsuit and is on the brink of bankruptcy. Prince Valkovsky turns out to be Nelly's father, who abandoned his wife after appropriating her money to bring about the ruin of her English-born father, the industrialist Jeremiah Smith. Nelly dies. Alyosha goes off with Katya, the Ikhmenevs prepare to leave for another part of the country, and Vanya faces the prospect of being left behind and alone in St Petersburg.

Notes from the House of the Dead, literally and more accurately *Notes from the Dead House* (*Записки из мертвого дома*, 1862), is Dostoevsky's fictionalized record of four years of unremitting hardship and privation suffered as a convict in one of Tsar Nicholas I's Siberian penal institutions. In 1854 he wrote to his brother: "The different folk I met in the settlement! I lived amongst them and got to know them well. The stories I heard from the vagabonds and felons – about their nefarious deeds and gruelling way of life – would be enough to fill several tomes. What an amazing set of people!" Dostoevsky looked upon penal servitude with the eyes of an artist, making imaginative generalizations and giving the narrative a deliberately fictional intensity and tone. And yet its genre category is unclear. Without a coherent plot or storyline, it is hardly a novel. Attempts to call the work a memoir are fundamentally wrong. Dostoevsky had a particular penchant for "notes", which is perhaps the most appropriate term.

Tolstoy had read it three times, and in a letter to the critic Nikolai Strakhov, he wrote: "I was a bit under the weather the other day and reread *The Dead House*. I'd forgotten a lot… I know of no better work in the whole of modern literature, including Pushkin… If you see Dostoevsky, tell him I love him." In his response, Strakhov informed Tolstoy that Dostoevsky was very pleased to hear the words of praise and asked to be allowed to keep Tolstoy's letter, only he was taken a little aback at the implied note of disrespect for Pushkin.

Notes from the Underground (*Записки из подполья*, 1864) is a work which holds an enduring fascination for critics and readers. The opening words are, as in *Humiliated and Insulted*, a model of simplicity. But, instead of a calm, level-headed statement – "Last year, on the evening of 22nd March, I had a most unusual experience" – we have a burst of paranoid personal observations: "I am a sick man… I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased", with no concern about whether the reader is prepared or interested.

At this stage one must of necessity note a certain lack of equivalence between *подполье* as in the original Russian title and "underground" – the nearest possible rendering of it into English. The Russian word is far more applicable to predominantly abstract conditions, from secretive, clandestine – in the political or criminal sense – to repressed, inhibited – in the psychological one. The book and its title were famously parodied in Woody Allen's *Notes from the Overfed* (1968): "I am fat. I am disgustingly fat. I am the

fattest human I know, etc." Zany though this spin-off may appear, it is in the spirit of Dostoevsky himself, because *Notes from the Underground*, like most of his fiction, is itself full of madcap, riotous humour.

In pictorial terms the sinister side of the underground man is essentially Walter Sickert's figure in the black waistcoat and white shirt sitting with his head bowed beside the naked corpse of a woman. Dostoevsky did not go that far just then. The broody murderer – precisely as depicted in Sickert – came a little later, in *The Idiot*.

We don't know what motivated Jack the Ripper, or the Camden Town Murderer – Sickert doesn't tell us, and neither does Dostoevsky explain why his anonymous underground man harbours such hatred for the attractive young prostitute Liza, whom he ravishes, sermonizes, moves to the limits of self-pity and then rejects cruelly so that she leaves his lodgings in utter desperation. Dostoevsky was already groping his way towards formulating the aesthetics of crime. This would be fully accomplished in the later work, *Devils*.

The eminent critic Nikolai Mikhailovsky has pointed out that the novel is not artistically persuasive because of this lack of motive for the hero's antipathy towards the benighted prostitute Liza. "There is no reason for his spite towards her. The underground man foresees no results from his tormenting her. He abandons himself to his pastime out of love for the art." But perhaps absence of motive is the whole crux of the matter – supreme evil thrives on absence of motive.

Crime and Punishment (*Преступление и наказание*, 1866) is one of the four of Dostoevsky's major novels, which Nabokov referred to as "the *so-called* major novels" (my italics). The arguably much greater, but less well-known Nobel-Prize-winning author Ivan Bunin, had a similarly low opinion of Dostoevsky's great novels, or novels of ideas, as they are also not infrequently referred to. Valentin Kataev recalls that Bunin raged over the hero, Raskolnikov: "Dostoevsky obliges you to witness impossible and inconceivable abominations and spiritual squalor. From here have come all Russia's ills – Decadence, Modernism, Revolution, young people who are infected to the marrow of their bones with *Dostoevshchina* – who are without direction in their lives, confused, spiritually and physically crippled by war, not knowing what to do with their strengths and their talents…"

At the heart of *Crime and Punishment* is the student Raskolnikov's premeditated murder of a miserable old woman moneylender with the manic idea that this act would somehow make him into a superman, raise him above the law and enable him to identify himself with Napoleon. Around this idea, Dostoevsky, armed with a marvellous title, manages to spin a truly fascinating tale. Issues of crime and punishment are always calculated to arouse interest, and he manages to score some significant firsts, to wit his creation of the detective Porfiry. "Wilkie Collins and Dickens portrayed

Victorian detectives, but no one had yet shown the 'master' detective, capable of deducing facts from psychological observation: in the twentieth century the super-detective was a close rival of the criminal for the status of hero," writes Professor Richard Peace.

As mentioned above, Dostoevsky was addicted to gambling, and he channelled this personal experience into his next novel, *The Gambler* (*Игрок*, 1866). The action takes place in the spoof town Roulettenburg, where a bunch of Russian prize idlers have fetched up to feed their habit and indulge in conspiracies and sterile romantic pursuits. As was to be expected, no one gets any richer, just the opposite, and all personal relationships end in frustration and heartache.

In a letter to his favourite niece Sofia Alexandrovna Ivanova, to whom he dedicated *The Idiot* (*Идиот*, 1868), Dostoevsky wrote: "I have been nurturing the idea of this novel a long time now. It is a particular favourite of mine, but is so difficult that I have not dared to tackle it… The main aim is to portray a positively good man. There's nothing more difficult than this in the world, especially nowadays. All writers, not only ours, but even the European ones too, who tried, had to give up, for the simple reason that the task is measureless."

The hero of the novel Prince Myshkin is a Christ-like figure. He is mentally distinctly unstable, indeed he brands himself an idiot. The question arises, can saintliness survive in the real world? Russia being the real world, the novel's answer is no, because it is synonymous with some kind of mental deficiency, which is bound to lead to disaster. At the beginning of the novel Myshkin returns from a Swiss sanatorium after a lengthy treatment, hopefully on the way to complete recovery. Abroad he had witnessed public executions by guillotine, and the memories continue to haunt him, especially the gruesome ordinariness of the preparatory ritual. What goes through the condemned man's head as he hears the swish of the descending blade? In St Petersburg he finds no solace. On the day of his arrival, without a respite, he is thrown into a vortex of events that would have unsettled a much stronger man. Representing the darker side of humanity is the volatile, passionate, reckless merchant Rogozhin, whom Myshkin gets to know on the journey. It is a fateful meeting. As the action unravels both come to grief in their rivalry and quest for happiness, Rogozhin's fate being, if anything, the more heart-rending, because he ends up with blood on his hands beside the lifeless corpse of the woman they both loved to distraction. As for Myshkin, he returns to the sanatorium, we fear permanently.

The novel is conceived on a large scale with numerous sub-plots and a host of secondary characters. True to form they are all colourfully depicted, invariably with customary Dostoevskian humour and wit. However, some critics have found the structure of the novel problematic, and it is not the most popular choice among a wider readership.

In the work *Devils* (*Бесы,* 1871–72, also known as *The Possessed* and *Demons*), one of Dostoevsky's main concerns is nihilism: this is embodied in the novel to devastating effect through its memorable characters. The great Russian critic and novelist Dmitry Merezhkovsky argues in *Gogol and the Devil* that the suave, smooth-talking clownish con man Chichikov in Gogol's *Dead Souls* is the devil par excellence, because he is one of us who goes about deceiving people left, right and centre with impunity, hiding under his mask of normality and ordinariness – a point worth noting in relation to *Devils.*

The novel boasts some of the most blood-curdling episodes imaginable, but at the same time the translator Michael R. Katz writes: "*Devils* is without doubt Dostoevsky's most humorous work. It has more irony, more elements of burlesque and parody, more physical comedy and buffoonery, more exaggerated characterizations and ambiguous use of language than any of his other works." We are indeed not miles away from the Marx Brothers' *Night at the Opera*. Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, with whom the novel opens and who continues to play a significant role to the very end, can, improbably enough, be seen as a Groucho Marx figure with a touch of Don Quixote thrown in. The picture is completed with the former's inimitable screen foil Margaret Dupont, who is represented in the novel by the grand and unapproachable Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina.

Dostoevsky based his story on a Russian press report of a brutal murder by a follower of the revolutionary anarchist Ivan Bakunin. He uses that as a paradigm for depicting a ruthless nationwide conspiracy, incidentally directed from abroad, to bring down the existing order in Russia. Acts of terrorism and extreme violence are used as political tools. But the events, despite being narrated by an apparently non-committal chronicler, are by no means a factual record of reality. The highly mysterious chronicler's very protestations of veracity are a novelist's ploy to draw the reader into a fantasy world that is blatantly of his own creation. At the centre of it are the demonically beguiling figures of Nicolas Stavrogin, a self-confessed paedophiliac and sadist, and his utterly unprincipled sidekick Peter Stepanovich Verkhovensky. Besides the motif of rampant terrorism, there is the theme of suicide, not as a desperate solution out of a psychological impasse, but as a supreme manifestation of one's will.

Dostoevsky had always been keenly interested in all aspects of publishing. Even his fictional characters are bitten by the bug. Vanya in *Humiliated and Insulted* talks to a publisher or entrepreneur, as he facetiously styles him, and appears to know his role and what motivates him; Liza Drozdova in *Devils* comes up with a serious proposal to bring out a digest, "an illuminating overview" of current affairs, and she waxes enthusiastic over the benefits and commercial viability of the prospective undertaking.

Dostoevsky himself was a prolific journalist and the founder and editor of several periodicals. Liza's idea in fact goes back to Dostoevsky's plans of 1864–65 to found *Notebook* – a fortnightly periodical which failed to materialize – and looks forward to *Diary of a Writer* (*Дневник писателя*, 1873–81), which did materialize in 1873. In both cases Dostoevsky was to be the sole contributor. It is for this reason that *Diary of a Writer* can, indeed should, be regarded as a free-standing literary work. In essence it is a ground-breaking, wide-ranging pot-pourri of all types of literary genres, "an illuminating overview" of all that continued to preoccupy the writer till the end of his days, and some of the issues touched upon were further reflected in his Pushkin speech and in *The Karamazov Brothers*.

In 1876 Dostoevsky wrote: "When, about a year and a half ago Nikolai Alexeyevich Nekrasov asked me to write a novel for *The Notes of the Fatherland*, I was on the point of starting my version of *Fathers and Sons*, but held back, and thank God for that. I was not ready. All I've been able to come up with so far is my *The Adolescent*."

Just as in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, the theme of the generation gap is at the heart of *The Adolescent* (*Подросток*, 1875). Incidentally the narrator-hero rejoices in the name of Arkady (Dolgoruky), the same as one of the principal characters, Arkady (Kirsanov), in Turgenev's story; the other – the more important of the two – being Evgeny Bazarov. The similarity does not end there. Both Arkady Dolgoruky and Evgeny Bazarov are kindred spirits, rebels at heart and ardent champions of liberalism and truth. This ideological confluence is quite remarkable because on most points the two authors could not see eye to eye at all.

Also, the theme of relationship with serf women is tackled head on by both authors, especially Dostoevsky, who of course extracts every ounce of drama from the controversy associated with such a liaison. Arkady is illegitimate: he is the son of the serf Sofia, wife of the bonded serf Makar Dolgoruky, and the gallivanting nobleman, Andrey Versilov. Dostoevsky is immediately on home ground – the trials and tribulations of a thoroughly dysfunctional family. After his wife had been taken away from him, Makar Dolgoruky leaves his village to wander off and walk the land as a penitent, surfacing only at the end of the story. Young Arkady, at nineteen – having been knocked all his life from pillar to post – is back with his biological father, whom he had hardly met since birth, eager to get to know him closely. It's a love-hate relationship from the start: Arkady is fascinated by Versilov, and is drawn to him inexorably. Versilov shares a good few characteristics with the devil of Ivan's nightmare in *The Karamazov Brothers*, who, in line with Dostoevsky's intertwining of good and evil, is of quite an affable, genial sort. Arkady wants to live up to his father, and in his young heart he nurtures a grand, but in his view eminently attainable and realistic idea. He lusts after money, and above all, power. As he says in the novel, he wants to become a Rothschild. Father

and son also lust after the same woman almost to the point of committing murder. In the background there is the ever-present mother figure of the saintly, long-suffering Sofia, and what with Makar Dolgoruky bearing a strong resemblance to Father Zosima, the similarity between Dostoevsky's last two novels is striking. Yet the atmosphere is altogether different. Perhaps the chaotic, topsy-turvy, structurally unbalanced *Karamazov Brothers* is more action packed and stimulating, intellectually intriguing and humorous too, which is what counts with readers in the end, even the more sophisticated ones. *The Adolescent* is, in that case, arguably too sophisticated and refined for its own good. One way or another *The Adolescent* has been overshadowed by his other great novels both in Russia and the Anglophone West.

Sigmund Freud wrote that *The Karamazov Brothers* (*Братья Карамазовы*, 1879–80) was "the most magnificent novel ever written". Indeed, the novel played right into his hands, above all as regards the Oedipal connection. The work blends together literature, philosophy and entertainment in way that has held a strong appeal for many intellectual readers.

At the heart of the novel is a dysfunctional family, four sons – one illegitimate – and the father, a dissolute, cunning, mistrustful old man, who is in a running feud with the eldest over money and the favours of the local siren. The conflict gets out of hand and Dmitry Karamazov is accused of patricide. Bound up with this intense family drama is Dostoevsky's exploration of many of his most deeply cherished ideas. The novel is also richly comic and philosophically challenging. One chapter, entitled *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, in which the churchman, in a confrontational dialogue with Christ, argues that freedom and happiness are incompatible, is styled a poem, and for its content and form occupies a unique place in literature.

This account of Dostoevsky's works is by no means exhaustive, but has had to be limited to some of the most famous and pivotal novels and novellas. During his career Dostoevsky wrote many other shorter works of fiction, not to mention articles, essays and travel writing, and among his short stories one could mention the following, among many others: *White Nights* (*Белые ночи*, 1848), a story of isolation and heartbreak spanning four nights, during which the protagonist realizes his love for a young girl called Nastenka must always remain unfulfilled; *The Eternal Husband* (*Вечный муж*, 1870), which compellingly describes a recently widowed man's encounter with his dead wife's former lover; *A Gentle Creature* (*Кроткая*, 1876), the tale of a widowed pawnbroker's turbulent relationship with a young customer who eventually becomes his wife; *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (*Сон смешного человека*, 1877), which recounts the spiritual journey of its suicidal protagonist, who finds salvation in an encounter with a young girl and a subsequent dream.

– Ignat Avsey, 2008

Select Bibliography

Standard Edition:
The most authoritative Russian edition of *Humiliated and Insulted* can be found in volume 3, edited by G.M. Fridlender, of Dostoevsky's *Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах* (*Complete Edition in Thirty Volumes*), produced in Leningrad in 1972–90 by the Nauka publishing company.

Biographies:
Carr, Edward Hallett, *Dostoevsky, 1821–1881: A New Biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931)
Dostoevsky, Anna, *Dostoevsky: Reminiscences*, tr. B. Stillman (Liveright, Dutton, 1974)
Frank, Joseph, *Dostoevsky*, vols. 1–5 (London: Robson, 1977–2002)
Grossman, Leonid Petrovich, *Dostoevsky: A Biography*, tr. Mary Mackler (London: Allen Lane, 1974)
Magarshack, David, *Dostoevsky* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962)
Mochulsky, Konstantin, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967)
Simmons, Ernest Joseph, *Dostoevsky: The Making of a Novelist* (London: John Lehmann, 1950)
Yarmolinsky, Avrahm, *Dostoevsky: A Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934)

On the Web:
www.petrsu.ru/~Dostoevsky
www.fyodordostoevsky.com
www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=11266

Translator's Note

Dr Johnson's dictum – that the only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it – is, in my view, particularly applicable to the novel. In such an approach therefore it is the entertainment value of a work which becomes the principal measure of quality. To apply this to Dostoevsky, who has traditionally been judged by other criteria, is to turn him on his head. And not before time! Dostoevsky needs to be reassessed, and reassessed radically. Up to the present he has been lauded almost exclusively for his major works. His earlier, shorter novels, on the other hand, have been woefully neglected. The loss has been both his and the reading public's. By the new standard that I am now applying, *Humiliated and Insulted* becomes his all-time number one, then follow *The Double*, *The Village of Stepanchikovo* and *The Gambler*, not necessarily in that order. My predilection for *Humiliated and Insulted* is by a narrow margin; what is most important, however, is that these works, between them, provide me with all the arguments I need to make my case; they show the author as an unrivalled storyteller pure and simple who drives on in headlong outpourings of extreme emotion and passion, untrammelled by the mind-bending complexities that are such a feature of his later novels. To many critics, and readers, those complexities and labyrinthine philosophical speculations have been a decided deterrent, as has the sheer size of the resulting tomes. Brevity is the soul of wit. However, my enthusiasm for Dostoevsky-lite does not mean I am siding with the relatively small but highly eminent coterie of his detractors. For me it is simply the case that if Dostoevsky had written those four novels and nothing else, his lasting fame would still have been assured.

Now it's all very well my waxing lyrical over my recommendations, but I cannot ignore the fact that not a single word of the text (foreign quotations apart) that the translator presents to the reader has been written by the original author himself. The American translator and academic Michael R. Katz said that for the authentic experience the reader is advised and urged to learn the language himself. I would quarrel in one respect only. The translation has to be *the* authentic experience. *It*, and not the original, becomes *the* original – the *de facto* original. Indeed there is no reason why the translation cannot surpass the original. Interestingly, Goethe preferred to read his own *Faust* in French, and he of all people had a choice. He even chose to give his reason in French: "*En allemand je ne peux lire le* Faust*, mais dans cette traduction française chaque trait me frappe comme s'il était tout*

nouveau pour moi. ("I cannot read *Faust* in German, but in this French translation every feature strikes me as if it were entirely new to me.") The translator in question was Gérard de Nerval. It is also said that the French translation of *The Life of Jesus* by the German theologian David Strauss sold more copies in Germany than in France.

The popularity of *Humiliated and Insulted* among present-day Russian readers is impressively high. Why then is it virtually unknown to the English-speaking world, which might have been expected to warm precisely to this kind of intricately constructed tale of passion and woe with a plot line that is rich in all the ingredients of modern best-selling fiction? The explanation might lie in the nature of the previous translations. I know of only three: the first by Frederick Whishaw (*Injury and Insult*, 1887); the second by the legendary Constance Garnett (*The Insulted and Injured*, 1915); and the third by Olga Shartse published in the Soviet Union in 1957 (*The Insulted and Humiliated*). The first two are currently out of print and the third available only at specialized outlets. The present attempt to recreate Dostoevsky's original in English is in the translator's mind an exercise in revealing to a new and wider readership a hitherto much neglected masterpiece. It will stand or – as did the previous translations – fall in the attempt.

The vast majority of recreational readers operate in one language only. They have no choice but to read foreign literature in translation, but I hope that like Goethe with his Faust, bilingual people, and even native speakers too with a command of English, will pick up this rendering of Dostoevsky's *Humiliated and Insulted* as worthy of attention per se. As a former language teacher, I would particularly encourage language students to read their own literature in translation. Overriding everything, however, as Robert Burton points out in his *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, written many centuries ago on the theme of the tenuousness of literary success and popularity, indeed of literary survival itself: "*pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*" ("the fate of books depends on the fancy of the reader").

In conclusion a word about my own style in relation to Dostoevsky's. It could be summed up in what one South American author said to his translator: "Translate not what I said, but what I was trying to say!" This would necessarily imply that the norms of the target language are paramount. What about the "warts and all" principle? Only as far as it goes. There are warts and warts – native speaker's mistakes and a foreigner's. The two are like chalk and cheese! "With Dostoevsky one can be pardoned for thinking one has walked into a lunatic asylum, but never into a museum of waxworks." The translator therefore has to be careful not to give the reader the impression that the lunatics are just foreigners communicating in a peculiar brand of English.

Appendix

Opening Pages of *Humiliated and Insulted*
in Russian

Глава I

Прошлого года, двадцать второго марта, вечером, со мной случилось престранное происшествие. Весь этот день я ходил по городу и искал себе квартиру. Старая была очень сыра, а я тогда уже начинал дурно кашлять. Еще с осени хотел переехать, а дотянул до весны. В целый день я ничего не мог найти и порядочного. Во-первых, хотелось квартиру особенную, не отжильцов, а во-вторых, хоть одну комнату, но непременно большую, разумеется вместе с тем и как можно дешевую. Я заметил, что в тесной квартире даже и мыслям тесно. Я же, когда обдумывал свои будущие повести, всегда любил ходить взад и вперед по комнате. Кстати: мне всегда приятнее было обдумывать мои сочинения и мечтать, как они у меня напишутся, чем в самом деле писать их, и, право, это было не от лености. От чего же?

Еще с утра я чувствовал себя нездоровым, а к закату солнца мне стало даже и очень нехорошо: начиналось что-то вроде лихорадки. К тому же я целый день был на ногах и устал. К вечеру, перед самыми сумерками, проходил я по Вознесенскому проспекту. Я люблю мартовское солнце в Петербурге, особенно закат, разумеется в ясный, морозный вечер. Вся улица вдруг блеснет, облитая ярким светом. Все дома как будто вдруг засверкают. Серые, желтые и грязно-зеленые цвета их потеряют на миг всю свою угрюмость; как будто на душе прояснеет, как будто вздрогнешь и кто-то подтолкнет тебя локтем. Новый взгляд, новые мысли... Удивительно, что может сделать один луч солнца с душой человека!

Но солнечный луч потух; мороз крепчал и начинал пощипывать за нос; сумерки густели; газ блеснул из магазинов и лавок. Поровнявшись с кондитерской Миллера, я вдруг остановился как вкопанный и стал смотреть на ту сторону улицы, как будто предчувствуя, что вот сейчас со мной случится что-то необыкновенное, и в это-то самое мгновение на противоположной стороне я увидел старика и его собаку. Я очень хорошо помню, что сердце мое сжалось от какого-то неприятнейшего ощущения и я сам не мог решить, какого рода было это ощущение.

Я не мистик; в предчувствия и гаданья почти и не верю; однако со мною, как может быть, и со всеми, случилось в жизни несколько происшествий, довольно необъяснимых. Например, хоть это

ст арик: почему при т огдашней моей вст рече с ним, я т от час почувст вовал, чт о в т от же вечер со мной случит ся чт о-т о не совсем обыденное? Впрочем, я был болен; а болезненные ощущения почт и всегда бывают обманчивы.

Ст арик своим медленным, слабым шагом, перест авляя ноги, как будт о палки, как будт о не сгибая их, сгорбившись и слегка ударяя т рост ью о плит ы т рот уара, приближался к кондит ерской. В жизнь мою не вст речал я т акой ст ранной, нелепой фигуры. И прежде, до эт ой вст речи, когда мы сходились с ним у Миллера, он всегда болезненно поражал меня. Его высокий рост , сгорбленная спина, мерт венное восьмидесят илет нее лицо, ст арое пальт о, разорванное по швам, изломанная круглая двадцат илет няя шляпа, прикрывавшая его обнаженную голову, на кот орой уцелел, на самом зат ылке, клочок уже не седых, а бело-желт ых волос; все движения его, делавшиеся как-т о бессмысленно, как будт о по заведенной пружине, – все эт о невольно поражало всякого, вст речавшего его в первый раз. Дейст вит ельно, как-т о ст ранно было видет ь т акого от жившего свой век ст арика одного, без присмот ра, т ем более чт о он был похож на сумасшедшего, убежавшего от своих надзират елей. Поражала меня т оже его необыкновенная худоба: т ела на нем почт и не было, и как будт о на кост и его была наклеена т олько одна кожа. Большие, но т усклые глаза его, вст авленные в какие-т о синие круги, всегда глядели прямо перед собою, никогда в ст орону и никогда ничего не видя, – я в эт ом уверен. Он хот ь и смот рел на вас, но шел прямо на вас же, как будт о перед ним пуст ое прост ранст во. Я эт о несколько раз замечал. У Миллера он начал являт ься недавно, неизвест но от куда и всегда вмест е с своей собакой. Никт о никогда не решался с ним говорит ь из посет ит елей кондит ерской, и он сам ни с кем из них не заговаривал.

“И зачем он т аскает ся к Миллеру, и чт о ему т ам делат ь? – думал я, ст оя по другую ст орону улицы и непреодолимо к нему приглядываясь. Какая-т о досада – следст вие болезни и уст алост и, – закипала во мне. – Об чем он думает ? – продолжал я про себя, – чт о у него в голове? Да и думает ли еще он о чем-нибудь? Лицо его до т ого умерло, чт о уж решит ельно ничего не выражает . И от куда он взял эт у гадкую собаку, кот орая не от ходит от него, как будт о сост авляет с ним чт о-т о целое, неразъединимое, и кот орая т ак на него похожа?”

Эт ой несчаст ной собаке, кажет ся, т оже было лет восемьдесят ; да, эт о непременно должно было быт ь. Во-первых, с виду она была т ак ст ара, как не бывают никакие собаки, а во-вт орых, от чего же

мне, с первого раза, как я ее увидал, т от час же пришло в голову, чт о эт а собака не может быт ь т акая, как все собаки; чт о она – собака необыкновенная; чт о в ней непременно должно быт ь чт о-т о фант аст ическое, заколдованное; чт о эт о, может быт ь, какой-нибудь Мефист офель в собачьем виде и чт о судьба ее какими-т о т аинст венными, неведомыми пут ами соединена с судьбою ее хозяина. Глядя на нее, вы бы т от час же согласились, посадка крупномеров чт о, наверно, прошло уже лет двадцат ь, как она в последний раз ела. Худа она была, как скелет , или (чего же лучше?) как ее господин. Шерст ь на ней почт и вся вылезла, т оже и на хвост е, кот орый висел, как палка, всегда крепко поджат ый. Длинноухая голова угрюмо свешивалась вниз. В жизнь мою я не вст речал т акой прот ивной собаки. Когда оба они шли по улице – господин впереди, а собака за ним следом, – т о ее нос прямо касался полы его плат ья, как будт о к ней приклеенный. И походка их и весь их вид чут ь не проговаривали т огда с каждым шагом:

Ст ары-т о мы, ст ары, господи, как мы ст ары!

Помню, мне еще пришло однажды в голову, чт о ст арик и собака как-нибудь выкарабкались из какой-нибудь ст раницы Гофмана, иллюст рированного Гаварни, и разгуливают по белому свет у в виде ходячих афишек к изданью. Я перешел через улицу и вошел вслед за ст ариком в кондит ерскую.

В кондит ерской ст арик ат т ест овал себя прест ранно, и Миллер, ст оя за своим прилавком, начал уже в последнее время делат ь недовольную гримасу при входе незваного посет ит еля. Во-первых, ст ранный гост ь никогда ничего не спрашивал. Каждый раз он прямо проходил в угол к печке и т ам садился на ст ул. Если же его мест о у печки бывало занят о, т о он, пост ояв несколько времени в бессмысленном недоумении прот ив господина, занявшего его мест о, уходил, как будт о озадаченный, в другой угол к окну. Там выбирал какой-нибудь ст ул, медленно усаживался на нем, снимал шляпу, ст авил ее подле себя на пол, т рост ь клал возле шляпы и зат ем, от кинувшись на спинку ст ула, ост авался неподвижен в продолжение т рех или чет ырех часов. Никогда он не взял в руки ни одной газет ы, не произнес ни одного слова, ни одного звука; а т олько сидел, смот ря перед собою во все глаза, но т аким т упым, безжизненным взглядом, чт о можно было побит ься об заклад, чт о

он ничего не видит из всего окружающего и ничего не слышит. Собака же, покрутившись раза два или три на одном месте, угрюмо укладывалась у ног его, вытыкала свою морду между его сапогами, глубоко вздыхала и, вытянувшись во всю свою длину на полу, тоже оставалась неподвижною на весь вечер, точно умирала на это время. Казалось, эти два существа целый день лежат где-нибудь мертвые и, как зайдет солнце, вдруг оживают единственно для того, чтобы дойти до кондитерской Миллера и тем исполнить какую-то таинственную, никому не известную обязанность. Засидевшись часа три-четыре, старик, наконец, вставал брал свою шляпу и отправлялся куда-то домой. Поднималась и собака и, опять поджав хвост и свесив голову, медленным прежним шагом машинально следовала за ним. Посетители кондитерской наконец начали всячески обходить старика и даже не садились с ним рядом, как будто он внушал им омерзение. Он же ничего этого не замечал.

Посетители этой кондитерской большею частию немцы. Они собираются сюда со всего Вознесенского проспекта – всё хозяева различных заведений: слесаря, булочники, красильщики, шляпные мастера, седельники – всё люди патриархальные в немецком смысле слова. У Миллера вообще наблюдалась патриархальность. Частого хозяин подходил к знакомым гостям и садился вместе с ними за стол, причем осушалось известное количество пунша. Собаки и маленькие дети хозяина тоже выходили иногда к посетителям, и посетители ласкали детей и собак. Все были между собою знакомы, и все взаимно уважали друг друга. И когда гости углублялись в чтение немецких газет, за дверью, в кварт ире хозяина, трещал августин, наигрываемый на дребезжащих фортепьянах старшей хозяйской дочкой, белокуренькой немочкой в локонах, очень похожей на белую мышку. Вальс принимался с удовольствием. Я ходил к Миллеру в первых числах каждого месяца читать русские журналы, которые у него получались.

Войдя в кондитерскую, я увидел, что старик уже сидит у окна, а собака лежит, как и прежде, растянувшись у ног его. Молча сел я в угол и мысленно задал себе вопрос: “Зачем я вошел сюда, когда мне тут решительно нечего делать, когда я болен и нужнее было бы спешить домой, выпить чаю и лечь в постель? Неужели в самом деле я здесь только для того, чтобы разглядывать этого старика?” Досада взяла меня. “Что мне за дело до него, – думал я, припоминая то ст ранное, болезненное ощущение, с которым я глядел на него еще на улице. – И что мне за дело до всех этих скучных немцев? К

чему эт о фант аст ическое наст роение духа? К чему эт а дешевая т ревога из пуст яков, кот орую я замечаю в себе в последнее время и кот орая мешает жит ь и глядет ь ясно на жизнь, о чем уже замет ил мне один глубокомысленный крит ик, с негодованием разбирая мою последнюю повест ь?" Но, раздумывая и сет уя, я все-т аки ост авался на мест е, а между т ем болезнь одолевала меня все более и более, и мне наконец ст ало жаль ост авит ь т еплую комнат у. Я взял франкфурт скую газет у, прочел две ст роки и задремал. Немцы мне не мешали. Они чит али, курили и т олько изредка, в полчаса раз, сообщали друг другу, от рывочно и вполголоса, какую-нибудь новост ь из Франкфурт а да еще какой-нибудь виц или шарфзин знаменит ого немецкого ост роумца Сафира; после чего с удвоенною национальною гордост ью вновь погружались в чт ение.

Я дремал с полчаса и очнулся от сильного озноба. Решит ельно надо было идт и домой. Но в т у минут у одна немая сцена, происходившая в комнат е, еще раз ост ановила меня. Я сказал уже, чт о ст арик, как т олько усаживался на своем ст уле, т от час же упирался куда-нибудь своим взглядом и уже не сводил его на другой предмет во весь вечер. Случалось и мне попадат ься под эт от взгляд, бессмысленно упорный и ничего не различающий: ощущение было пренеприят ное, даже невыносимое, и я обыкновенно как можно скорее переменял мест о. В эт у минут у жерт вой ст арика был один маленький, кругленький и чрезвычайно опрят ный немчик, со ст оячими, т уго накрахмаленными ворот ничками и с необыкновенно красным лицом, приезжий гост ь, купец из Риги, Адам Иваныч Шульц, как узнал я после, корот кий прият ель Миллеру, но не знавший еще ст арика и многих из посет ит елей. С наслаждением почит ывая "Dorfbarbier" и попивая свой пунш, он вдруг, подняв голову, замет ил над собой неподвижный взгляд ст арика. Эт о его озадачило. Адам Иваныч был человек очень обидчивый и щекот ливый, как и вообще все "благородные" немцы. Ему показалось ст ранным и обидным, чт о его т ак прист ально и бесцеремонно рассмат ривают . С подавленным негодованием от вел он глаза от неделикат ного гост я, пробормот ал себе чт о-т о под нос и молча закрылся газет ой. Однако не выт ерпел и минут ы через две подозрит ельно выглянул из-за газет ы: т от же упорный взгляд, т о же бессмысленное рассмат ривание. Смолчал Адам Иваныч и в эт от раз. Но когда т о же обст оят ельст во повт орилось и в т рет ий, он вспыхнул и почел своею обязанност ию защит ит ь свое благородст во и не уронит ь перед благородной публикой прекрасный

город Ригу, кот орого, вероят но, счит ал себя предст авит елем. С нет ерпеливым жест ом бросил он газет у на ст ол, энергически ст укнув палочкой, к кот орой она была прикреплена, и, пылая собст венным дост оинст вом, весь красный от пунша и от амбиции, в свою очередь уст авился своими маленькими воспаленными глазками на досадного ст арика. Казалось, оба они, и немец и его прот ивник, хот ели пересилит ь друг друга магнет ическою силою своих взглядов и выжидали, кт о раньше сконфузит ся и опуст ит глаза. Ст ук палочки и эксцент рическая позиция Адама Иваныча обрат или на себя внимание всех посет ителей. Все т от час же от ложили свои занят ия и с важным, безмолвным любопыт ст вом наблюдали обоих прот ивников. Сцена ст ановилась очень комическою. Но магнет изм вызывающих глазок красненького Адама Ивановича совершенно пропал даром. Ст арик, не забот ясь ни о чем, продолжал прямо смот рет ь на взбесившегося господина Шульца и решит ельно не замечал, чт о сделался предмет ом всеобщего любопыт ст ва, как будт о голова его была на луне, а не на земле. Терпение Адама Иваныча наконец лопнуло, и он разразился.

Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks go to all my friends for their unstinting help and warm encouragement in preparing the text and critical apparatus, namely to (in no particular order): Professor Neil Cornwell, Hugh Davidson, Joanna Wright, Peter Khoroche, John Moloney, Antony Wood, Dr Mary Ann Barnhart, Dr Virginie Avsejs, Dr Alexey Grigoriev, Leonid Feygin, Sergey and Natalia Toumakov and Daffni Percival.

The Alma editorial team under the able leadership of Christian Müller created a cooperative, industrious atmosphere in which I was able to meet all the deadlines in preparing an edition that will hopefully meet with the readers' approval.

I am especially grateful to Daffni Percival, poet, teacher and translator for her splendid rendition of Yakov Polonsky's poem *The Bell*, (1854).

– Ignat Avsey

Dedication

To my beloved sister Virginie

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

– Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*